

**Local Government Reform in Tasmania 1906-1939:
with special reference to the North West Coast**

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Abstract

This thesis examines local government reform in Tasmania primarily between 1906 and 1939. The *Local Government Act* 1906 gave the state for the first time a comprehensive system of municipal government. This Act arose from the economic pressures placed on the new state government by federation. The government had tried several times to impose a more efficient system on the island, but failed due to an obstinate Legislative Council and strident opposition from local bodies. The 1906 Act was a compromise between the aim of the government for greater economy and efficiency and the desire of local bodies to preserve their existing interests. After the first world war, the Tasmanian municipal system gradually suffered from increasing overheads, lower revenues, and the revolution in motor-transport. This led some municipal councils into financial difficulties in the 1930s. During this decade the state government came under pressure from the Commonwealth government to reform its administrative practices. Faced with some ailing municipalities, the government appointed a Royal Commission in 1939 to review the 1906 Act and suggest some measures of improving the system. The outcome of this process was the lacklustre *Local Government Act* 1940. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the pressure for such reform and suggest why substantial changes was not forthcoming.

Given the large scope of the subject, and with due regard to the limitations on research time and writing space, the focus is on one region, the North West, and, in particular, the Devonport and Leven councils, as case studies in which to draw general conclusions concerning reform in the chosen period. Space has also limited any detailed comparison

of Tasmania's experience during this time with the municipal systems elsewhere in Australia.

Chapters one and two give a broad outline of the process that led to the passing of the 1906 Act. Chapter three examines the attachment to the community of interest principle on the North West and its consequences for municipal reform. Chapter four explores regionalism on the North West after the first world war. Chapter five and six examines the stresses put on the municipal system in the post-war period and the government's attempts at reform. The last chapter studies the proceedings and outcome of the 1939 Royal Commission.

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Abbreviations

AJPA	<i>Australian Journal of Public Administration</i>
AJPH	<i>Australian Journal of Politics and History</i>
AMJ	<i>Australian Municipal Journal</i>
AOT	<i>Archives Office of Tasmania</i>
CPP	<i>Commonwealth of Australia: Parliamentary Papers</i>
JPPP(Tas)	<i>Tasmania: Journal and Printed Papers of Parliament</i>
JRAHS	<i>Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society</i>
PA	<i>Public Administration (Sydney)</i>
THRAPP	<i>Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings</i>

Introduction

Local government reform in Tasmania has long been a fiercely contested battle between the state government, municipal councils, and the Legislative Council. The focus of this thesis is to explore local government and attempts at reform in Tasmania between 1906 and 1939. In 1906 an Act was passed by the Tasmanian parliament giving the state for the first time a comprehensive system of municipal government. After the First World War, the municipal system began to suffer from increasing overheads, lower revenues, and the revolution in motor-transport. Several attempts were made to amalgamate municipalities in the 1920s with the aim to solve these problems, but were unsuccessful. The position of the councils worsened in the 1930s, with some falling into financial trouble.

The Ogilvie Labor government, not the most sympathetic supporter of the existing municipal system, and under pressure from the Commonwealth government, announced in 1938 that it intended a major overhaul of local administration on the island. Looking to amalgamate municipalities, it created a Royal Commission to propose reforms. The subsequent report and proposed amalgamations were not viewed favourably by local bodies or the Legislative Council. Faced with much opposition and anxious to pass some sort of municipal reform, the Labor government dropped from its proposed local government bill of 1940 the most contentious reforms of the municipal system, including amalgamation. After promising much, the outcome from the Royal Commission of 1939 was little.

In order to determine why this was so local government in Tasmania must first be placed in a broader context. It is often said that local government is the poor relation in

the Australian three-tier system of government.¹ This is despite having its roots dating back before Federation and the introduction of responsible self-government that created colonial (later state) legislatures.² The reason for such a disparaging attitude towards local government in this country has been attributed to geography³ and culture,⁴ but has not been helped by scholars seeing local government as an uninspiring or unimportant subject in which to study.⁵ The early historiography of the development of local institutions in Australia viewed the process negatively.⁶ In 1947 F. A. Bland lamented that 'nowhere in the British Commonwealth is local government so rudimentary as in Australia, nor do local institutions and local opinion exercise so little influence on the central organs of politics and administration'.⁷ Ruth Atkins in 1960 wrote 'at no stage has there been any general demand for local self-government, nor have the conditions ever been favourable to its easy growth'.⁸ She concluded that a characteristic feature of local government development in Australia has been 'the attempt of higher government

¹ J. Robbins, 'Localism and Local Government in South Australia', *Politics*, vol. 13(1) 1978 p81

² A. W. Grieg, 'Local Government in Early Australia', *Australian Municipal Journal (AMJ)*, August 1970 pp. 56-8.

³ for instance, W. K. Hancock, *Australia*, (New York, 1931) pp. 69-70

⁴ R. N. Spann, *Public Administration in Australia*, 3rd edition, (Sydney 1973) p221

⁵ C. Aulich, 'From Convergence to Divergence: reforming Australian local government', *Australian Journal of Public Administration (AJPA)*, Vol. 58 (3) 1999 p12, see also I. Gray, *Politics in Place: social power relations in an Australian country town*, (Cambridge 1991) p44; and J. Robbins 'Localism' p81

⁶ see G. Greenwood (ed.), *Australia: a social and political history*, (Sydney 1955) p245, M. Barnard, *A History of Australia*, (Sydney, 1962) p436; J. D. B. Miller, *Australian Government and Politics: an introductory survey*, (London 1964) p198, J. D. B. Miller, *Australia*, (London 1966) pp 109-10; O. H. K. Spate, *Australia*, (London 1968) pp. 105-106; M. R. Rawlinson, 'Administering Local Government Reform in Australia: the state experience', in R. Wattenhall and M. Painter (ed.) *The First Thousand Days of Labor*, Vol. 2 Australasian Political Studies Association Conference 1975 p68

⁷ F. A. Bland, 'Public Administration and its Problems', in C. Hartley-Grattan (ed.), *Australia*, (Berkeley 1947) p120.

⁸ R. N. Spann, *Public Administration in Australia*, (Sydney 1960) p157

authorities first to persuade and then to require local groups to accept financial and administrative responsibility for certain tasks'.⁹

Since the 1970s greater research has been conducted into the municipal history of Australia and has revealed different trends in the development of local institutions around the country, and greater complexity in the relationship between state and local government and the role of municipal institutions in fostering the settlement of Australia.¹⁰ Unfortunately, one area that little has been written on is the relationship between the Commonwealth and local government, especially before the Second World War.¹¹ This is due in part to the Commonwealth having little direct contact with local bodies until the Whitlam government,¹² and the predominance of a view for a long time that saw local government as being merely a subordinate to state government.¹³

The history of local government in this country to the early twentieth century has often been separated into three broad phases, all occurring at different times in each particular history of the Australian colonies. The first phase corresponds roughly to the period before responsible self-government was granted to the colonies. It includes the first

⁹ *ibid.*, for a different view see J. M. Power, 'The Discipline of Public Administration and the Study of Local Government', *AJPA*, Vol. 39 (3/4) 1980 pp. 352-358; Atkins later repudiated this view R. Atkins, *Albany to Zeehan: a new look at local government*, (Sydney 1979) chapter 3

¹⁰ see especially, J. Power, R. Wettenhall, and J. Halligan (ed.), *Local Government Systems of Australia*, (Canberra 1981); also F. A. Larcombe's impressive three volume study of New South Wales, vol. I *The Origin of Local Government in New South Wales 1831-58* (Sydney 1973); vol. II *The Stabilisation of Local Government in New South Wales 1858-1906* (Sydney 1976); vol. III *The Advancement of Local Government in New South Wales 1906 to the present* (Sydney 1978); and M. Rawlinson, 'A Defence of Local Government', in R. Lucy (ed.) *The Pieces of Politics*, (South Melbourne 1975) pp. 476-486.

¹¹ see A. Parkin, *Governing the Cities: the Australian experience in perspective* (South Melbourne 1982) chp. 8; C. J. Lloyd and P. N. Troy, 'A History of Federal Intervention', in P. N. Troy (ed.) *Federal Power in Australian Cities* (Sydney 1978) pp. 11-38.

¹² see P. Self, 'The Federal Government's Role in Local Government Finance', in G. Brennan (ed.) *Local Government Finance: Centre for Research on Federal Financial Relations Occasional Paper no. 41* (ANU 1987) pp.1-2.

¹³ See S. R. Davis and C. A. Hughes, 'The Literature of Australian Government and Politics', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* (AJPH) vol. 4(1) pp.124-125; for a history of the concerted effort of local government to extract more funds from the Commonwealth government after 1945, see A. Morse, *Funding Local Government: the third tier* (Bathurst 1983).

tentative steps of British authorities to transfer responsibility and cost of some local projects onto local residents.¹⁴ In New South Wales it resulted in the *Parish Roads Act* 1840, enabling trustees to levy a rate to maintain local roads, and the *District Councils Act* 1842, creating councils able to raise rates to fulfil a number of duties including maintaining roads, bridges, public buildings and schools.¹⁵ While a number of district councils were subsequently established, the scheme produced unsatisfactory results and the councils were soon abolished.¹⁶ In Victoria, councils were established in Melbourne in 1842 and Geelong in 1849.¹⁷ In South Australia, a municipal corporation of Adelaide was created in 1840, and the *District Council Act* 1852 enabled councils to be created to look after roads and conduct other duties.¹⁸ In Western Australia, the Perth Town Trust was established in 1838, and other legislation created to enable trustees in outlying areas to manage roads.¹⁹ In Tasmania, roads districts and municipal councils at Hobart and Launceston were established from the late 1840s.²⁰ But these early institutions had mixed histories, shunned often by local residents, and most either collapsed or were generally ineffectual.²¹

The second phase occurred after responsible government was granted to each colony. It is often called the 'permissive' stage, whereby colonial governments relied upon the

¹⁴ Atkins, *Albany to Zeehan* p19, see also Larcombe *The Origin of Local Government in New South Wales 1831-58*.

¹⁵ G. H. Knibbs, *Local Government in Australia* (Melbourne 1919) pp. 8-9.

¹⁶ Spann, *Public Administration* 1st edition, p162.

¹⁷ Knibbs, *Local Government in Australia*, p29.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p81.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p95.

²⁰ R. L. Wettenhall, *A Guide to Tasmanian Government Administration*, (Hobart 1968) pp. 311-12

²¹ Spann, *Public Administration*, p162; for more on the early roots of municipal institutions in Australia see M. Jones, *Managing Local Government: leadership for the twenty-first century*, (Melbourne 1989) pp. 47-55; K. Grose, 'Sir George Gipps and Municipal Institutions in New South Wales', *Journal of Royal Australia Historical*

Grieg under the title 'Local Government in Early Australia' in *AMJ*, Sept. 1970 pp. 106-7; Oct. 1970 pp.

voluntary formation of local authorities.²² Responsible self-government was granted to New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania in 1856, South Australia 1857 and Queensland 1860. Quickly recognized was the importance municipal institutions could play in the creation of truly 'responsible' governments. As the Tasmanian governor Sir H. E. F. Young in a speech to parliament at the beginning of 1858 stressed:

when the political institutions of the mother country were adopted, so far as they were susceptible of adaptation in the government of Tasmania, prudence and consistency required that they should be followed by the introduction of other institutions of that country which, although less conspicuous, are yet indispensable auxiliaries to their perfect operation. Of this character are the municipal and other local institutions which hereby subdivide public duties – carry the principles and modes of self-government throughout the whole framework of society, - and by the opinion and the habits which they foster, afford at the same time, inestimable guarantees of public liberty, and a conservative barrier against political license.²³

Acts were created around this time that enabled residents if they so wished to petition the governor-in-council with the request to be proclaimed a municipal district. This occurred in Victoria in 1854,²⁴ New South Wales and Tasmania in 1858,²⁵ South Australia in 1861,²⁶ and in Queensland in 1864.²⁷ The permissive system had mixed results Australia-wide. It was most successful in Victoria, where due to the goldrushes and the proliferation of inland towns municipal councils covered much of the colony by the early 1860s.²⁸

132-36; Nov. 1970 pp. 171-2; Dec. 1970-Jan. 1971 pp. 189-191; Feb. 1971 pp. 235-239; and Mar. 1971 pp. 272-4.

²² Atkins, *Albany to Zeehan* p19; Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems*, pp.10-12.

²³ *Tasmania: Journal and Printed Papers of Parliament* JPPP(Tas), 1857 p278-279.

²⁴ *Municipal Institutions Act* 1854.

²⁵ *Municipalities Act* 1858 and *Rural Municipalities Act* 1858 respectively.

²⁶ *Municipal Corporations Act* 1861.

²⁷ *Municipal Institutions Act* 1864. Western Australia is an exception, having passed a *Municipal Institutions Act* in 1871 but not obtaining responsible government till 1890.

²⁸ A. Davies, *Local Government in Victoria*, (Melbourne 1951) p14.

It was least successful in New South Wales, which by 1906 had only 1 per cent of its country incorporated.²⁹ In the other colonies, long-established areas and those new settlements that sprang up around them were eager to be incorporated, but as settlement expanded into rural areas far from capital cities the general trend was to avoid municipal districts and rely on 'roads and bridges' members of parliament to secure local needs.³⁰

This became costly for the colonial governments, and so the third phase of Australian local government history at the beginning of the twentieth century came into being. This was the move by colonial governments for the mandatory incorporation of existing local authorities into one broad comprehensive scheme of local government.³¹ This aimed to ensure more efficient local administration and transferred some of the burden for public works and services from the public purse to local residents. Acts establishing comprehensive municipal systems of government were passed by Queensland in 1878,³² South Australia in 1887,³³ Western Australia in 1895,³⁴ and New South Wales and Tasmania in 1906.³⁵

The flurry of municipal reform in the first fifty years of colonial responsible government was in contrast to the first fifty years of Federation. In this period, according to John Halligan and Roger Wettenhall, local government in Australia became 'ossified', and, despite some attempts by state governments, little headway in municipal reform was

²⁹ M. Bowman, 'Local Government in Australia' in M. Bowman, and W. Hampton (ed.), *Local Democracies: a study in comparative local government*, (Melbourne 1983) p167.

³⁰ R. Gerritsen, and D. Osborn, 'Reform of Local Government in Australia', in J. Kubota, *Comparative Study of Local Government Reform in Japan, Australia and New Zealand*, (Sydney 1997) p59. For an account of how localism influenced colonial politics, see P. Loveday and A. W. Martin, *Parliament Factions and Parties: the first thirty years of responsible government in New South Wales, 1856-1889* (Carlton 1966) chapter four

³¹ Atkins, *Albany to Zeehan* p19; Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems*, pp.12-15.

³² *Local Government Act* 1878.

³³ *Municipal Corporations Act* 1887.

³⁴ *Municipal Institutions Act* 1895.

³⁵ *Local Government Act* 1906 in both states.

made.³⁶ A similar situation developed in New Zealand, which experienced a continuing multiplication of small local authorities during this period.³⁷ A bill was first introduced in 1912 to amalgamate units for a more efficient administration, but it failed due to concerted opposition within parliament and from local bodies themselves.³⁸ After the first world war, new technology and financial mismanagement led to a bill in 1937 designed to create a commission to cut by a third local bodies in the country. It was subsequently postponed due to the outbreak of the Second World War.³⁹

In Britain however, this period was characterized by the central government handing greater powers and responsibilities to larger local authorities at the expense of smaller bodies, and the desire to amalgamate smaller authorities for greater efficiency.⁴⁰ A Royal Commission on local government of Greater London was held in 1921-3, a Royal Commission on local government in 1923-5, and a Local Government Boundary Commission established in 1945-9. A 1926 Act limited the number of small county boroughs that could be created, and another in 1929 established protocols for the alteration of district councils boundaries. The Boundaries Commission sought greater powers to enable a major overhaul of the municipal system in 1945, but the difficult post-war situation saw it rebuffed.⁴¹

State governments in Australia tentatively pursued this trend of desiring larger bodies to discharge local services. This was to be achieved either through amalgamation of

³⁶ Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems*, p79.

³⁷ R. J. Polaschek (ed.), *Local Government in New Zealand*, (Wellington 1956) p29.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p30.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p34.

⁴⁰ see J. P. Dunbabin, 'British Local Government Reform: the nineteenth century and after', *English Historical Review*, vol. 92 1977 pp. 777-904; B. Keith-Lucas, *English Local Government in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, (London 1977); K. B. Smellie, *A History of Local Government*, (London 1968).

⁴¹ C. J. Davies, 'The Reorganization of Local Government in England', *Canadian Public Administration*, vol. 13(4) 1970 p371.

existing bodies, or by encouraging greater regional co-operation between councils in the same area.⁴² In New South Wales, legislation was passed enabling councils to form joint authorities in matters of common concern, and three were immediately formed between 1913 and 1915. In 1920 a county system was inaugurated to foster greater co-operation between councils.⁴³ Sydney experienced a Greater City Movement, with unsuccessful attempts in 1912, 1915 and 1931 to unify existing city councils into a single metropolitan authority.⁴⁴ A new states movement also arose during this period, in Grafton in 1915 and the Riverina in 1922, which demanded more autonomy and control of local affairs. Royal Commissions were held to assess the feasibility of new states in 1924, 1929 and 1935, but instead advocated greater regional co-operation between existing municipal areas.⁴⁵

In Victoria, the municipal system hardly changed, except for an unsuccessful Greater Melbourne movement put forward in 1913.⁴⁶ In contrast, the early twentieth century saw a proliferation of local authorities in Queensland, 186 by 1916. Some amalgamations took place between 1916 and 1918 to reduce this number, but a Royal Commission was appointed in 1927 to establish a commission to review boundaries with a view to effect further amalgamations. A report by this commission in 1928 produced a storm of protest

⁴² see C. P. Harris, 'Regional and Local Government', *Publius*, vol. 7(3) 1977 pp. 119-145.

⁴³ Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems*, p134.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p136-7; see also B. Miller, 'Greater Sydney 1892-1952', *Public Administration (Sydney) PA*, vol. 13 1954 pp. 110-122.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p134; for more on the new states movement, see R. S. Parker (ed.) *New States for Australia*, The Australian Institute of Political Science Spring Forum 1955 (Sydney 1955); for more on local government in New South Wales see E. H. Selby, 'Local Government in New South Wales', *PA*, vol. 2 (3) 1940 pp. 159-66, F. A. Larcombe, *A History of Local Government in New South Wales*, (Sydney 1955); H. E. Maiden, *The History of Local Government in New South Wales*, (Sydney 1966).

⁴⁶ Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems*, p134; for more on local government in Victoria see A. F. Davies, 'Local Government in Melbourne', *PA*, vol. 14 1955 pp. 65-84; F. A. Jenkins 'Local Government in Australia - Victoria', *PA*, vol. 5(5) 1944 pp. 211-217; B. Barrett, *The Civic Frontier. the origin of local communities and local government in Victoria*, (Carlton 1979); D. Dunstan, *Governing the Metropolis*, (Carlton 1984).

and was quickly shelved.⁴⁷ After failed attempts in 1917 and 1923, a Greater Brisbane scheme was passed in 1924, incorporating some fifty local bodies into a single authority.⁴⁸

In South Australia, municipal councils were continually formed so that by 1930 there were some 196. After a Royal Commission, this number was reduced to 142. In 1934 a new Act was passed that replaced the previous two Acts for district councils and municipal corporations.⁴⁹ Western Australia remained relatively quiet on the reform front, with only a Greater Perth movement beginning in 1910 keeping the government occupied.⁵⁰ So the post-Federation trend of local government in Australia to the second world war was the desire by state governments for larger and more competent local bodies. Despite this trend, only modest municipal reform was made.

The purpose of this thesis is to ask, in the context of the Tasmanian municipal system, why was this so? As was noted earlier, after the First World War municipal councils in Tasmania began experiencing difficulties, leading eventually to financial trouble in the 1930s. The state government was unimpressed by these developments and pushed for a Royal Commission to investigate the municipal system and propose reforms. However, substantial reforms from this process did not eventuate.

⁴⁷ Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems*, pp. 384-5.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p382-3; for more on local government in Queensland see C. E. Chuter, 'Local Government in Australia – Queensland', *PA*, vol. 5(5) 1944 pp. 231-235; R. H. Robinson, *First Century of Local Government in Queensland*, (Brisbane 1954) and *For My Country: a factual and historical outline of local government in Queensland*, (Brisbane 1957); G. Greenwood (ed.), *Brisbane 1859-1959: a history of local government*, (Brisbane 1959); C. P. Harris, *Local Government and Regionalism in Queensland 1859 to 1977*, (Canberra 1978).

⁴⁹ Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems*, p576; for more on local government in South Australia, see V. S. Sheppard, 'Local Government in South Australia', *PA*, vol. 2(2) 1940 pp. 76-85 and 'Local Government in Australia – South Australia', *PA*, vol. 5(5) 1944 pp. 219-223.

⁵⁰ Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems*, p655-6; see M. Tauman, 'Local Government in Australia – Western Australia', *PA*, vol. 5(5) 1944 pp. 224-30; J. R. H. Johns, 'The Development of Local Government in Western Australia', *PA*, vol. 8(4) 1949 pp. 172-9.

The existing literature on the Tasmanian municipal system does not satisfactorily explain why such a result was forthcoming. Sadly, and in contrast to some other states, not much of any great depth has been written on the subject.⁵¹ Some research has been conducted into the development of local government in the state. This includes K. R. Von Stieglitz's basic if inadequate history of local government in Tasmania;⁵² W. D. Kavanagh's work on the convict administration;⁵³ Dora Heard's detailing of how parishes in early Tasmania provided a useful administrative function;⁵⁴ Michael Roe's examination of the establishment of local self-government in Hobart and Launceston;⁵⁵ and Shayne Breen's chapter on how local bodies in the districts of Northern Tasmania dealt with various problems they confronted in colonial times.⁵⁶ Other studies include Stefan Petrow's book on the involvement of municipal councils in rectifying certain health problems,⁵⁷ and books on Glenorchy, Clarence, and histories of the municipal councils of Campbell Town and Richmond that have merged the feats of local government into a more general local history.⁵⁸

⁵¹ see for instance D. Heard, and R. J. K. Chapman, 'A Bibliography of Literature of Tasmanian Politics and Government', *Politics*, vol. 9(1) 1974 special supplement p3, 22-23

⁵² K. R. Von Stieglitz, *A History of Local Government in Tasmania from the earliest settlement of Van Diemen's Land to the present times*, (Hobart 1958)

⁵³ W. D. Kavanagh, 'The Administration of Tasmania its origins, development and future direction', (University of Tasmania M.Soc.Sc Thesis 1987)

⁵⁴ D. Heard, 'The development of the parish in Tasmania', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings (THRAPP)* vol. 16(1) 1968 pp. 26-34.

⁵⁵ M. Roe, 'The Establishment of Local self-government in Hobart and Launceston, 1845-1858', *THRAPP*, vol. 14(1) 1966 pp. 21-45; see also S. Petrow, 'Painful Birth: municipal government in Hobart Town 1845-1857', *THRAPP*, vol. 49, 2002, pp. 203-24

⁵⁶ S. Breen, *Contested places: Tasmania's northern districts from ancient times to 1900*, (Hobart 2001)

⁵⁷ S. Petrow, *Sanatorium of the South? public health and politics in Hobart and Launceston, 1875-1914*, (Sandy Bay 1995)

⁵⁸ A. Alexander and M. Tomlin, *Glenorchy 1804-1964*, (Glenorchy 1986); A. Alexander, M. Tomlin and D. Young, *Glenorchy 1964-1998*, (Glenorchy 1998); A. Alexander, *The Eastern Shore: a history of Clarence*, (Rosny Park 2003); *Campbell Town Tasmania: history and centenary of municipal government* compiled by the Historical Committee of the National Trust of Australia (Campbell Town 1966); W. J. Rowlands, *Richmond's 100 years of municipal government*, (Richmond, 1961).

In terms of studying local government reform in Tasmania, V. G. William explored the politics and process in passing the *Local Government Act* 1906,⁵⁹ and Roger Wettenhall and Ralph Chapman have made many valuable contributions in chronicling local government reform after the second world war.⁶⁰ More recently, attempts at municipal reform in Tasmania have been covered in a thesis by Ivan Zwart on the amalgamation process of 1993,⁶¹ and a subsequent article with Marcus Haward on the 1997 attempts at reform.⁶²

In his thesis, Zwart points out that Tasmania has a long history of failed attempts at restructuring its local government boundaries. These failures he attributed 'to the forceful nature of state government demands for reform, and a general lack of appreciation of the need for reform within local government'.⁶³ W. A. Townsley, in a brief review of Tasmanian municipal history in his book *Tasmania: microcosm of the federation or vassal state*, also noted the long-time antagonism to amalgamation held by municipal councils.⁶⁴ But little in the existing literature suggests why this was so.

One of the latest reviews held in relation to local government in Tasmania in 1997 might provide a valuable clue. A survey of residents held around the state in 1996 found that respondents tend to identify more with their suburb or town (52%) than with their

⁵⁹ V. G. William, 'Local Government Reform 1906-07: a permanent panacea?', (University of Tasmania BA Hons 1970).

⁶⁰ see as an example R. L. Wettenhall, 'Tasmania Local Government at the Crossroads', *PA*, vol. 21(4) 1962 pp. 378-387; 'Municipal Reform in Tasmania', *Tasmanian Architect*, August 1966 pp. 23-4, 33-35; and *Tasmanian Government Administration*, pp. 311-325. R. J. K. Chapman, *Local Government Reform in Tasmania*, (Hobart 1973) and 'Tasmania' in Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems*, pp. 705-95.

⁶¹ I. Zwart, 'Local Government Amalgamation in Tasmania' (University of Tasmania BA Hons 1997).

⁶² M. Haward and I. Zwart, 'Local Government in Tasmania: reform and restructuring', *AJPA*, vol. 59(3) 2000 pp. 34-47.

⁶³ Zwart, 'Local Government Amalgamation in Tasmania' p16.

⁶⁴ W. A. Townsley, *Tasmania: microcosm of the federation or vassal state 1945-1983*, (Hobart 1994) p381.

council area (21%).⁶⁵ This begs the question about the relationship between municipal boundaries and local identity. If municipal councils are viewed as nothing else than administrative bodies, then their boundaries should mean little, and should be organized around financial and efficiency considerations. However, Townsley notes that the frequent reasons given by those traditionally against amalgamation is that it leads to a loss of local identity, would extend the distance between residents and their controlling authority, and would not really guarantee improved efficiency or costs.⁶⁶ This suggests that, while residents do not owe a primary loyalty to municipal boundaries, they do have a significant attachment to the idea that they should correspond closely to their strong identification with their local communities.

This can be explained in a number of ways. One answer perhaps might lie in the traditional regionalism and parochialism of Tasmanian society and political culture. This feature of Tasmania has been long noted⁶⁷ and continues to exert considerable influence over the lives of its inhabitants today. It is usually attributed to an amalgam of historical, economic, political, administrative and geographical factors,⁶⁸ and is most often seen as a negative feature of Tasmanian life, especially in politics.⁶⁹ More recently, the *Mercury* newspaper has seen Tasmania as being 'cursed by parochialism, an affliction spread and fed by politicians and aldermen who are too weak to resist the pressures of constituents

⁶⁵ 'Community survey of local government structures', paper no. 3, in Local Government Board 1997 Review of Councils, Volume 2, p iv.

⁶⁶ Townsley, *Tasmania*, p381.

⁶⁷ see for instance W. A. Townsley, 'The Government of Tasmania', in S. R. Davis (ed.) *The Government of the Australian States*, (Sydney 1960) pp. 486-7; P. Boyce, 'Tasmania', in J. Rorke (ed.) *Politics at State Level*, (Sydney 1970) p92; B. Davis, 'Tasmania: the political economy of a peripheral state', in B. Head, *The Politics of Development in Australia*, (North Sydney 1986) p211; R. Herr, 'Political Chronicles – Tasmania', *Australia Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 48(4) 2002 p584.

⁶⁸ S. Tanner, 'Regionalism and Newspapers in Tasmania', *Australian Journalism Review*, Vol. 16(1) 1994 p57.

⁶⁹ see 'End to Parochialism' *The Advocate*, 23 June 1998, and 'Ugly face of parochialism', *Mercury*, 10 January 1995.

and parties'.⁷⁰ This comment suggests that parochialism is not something created from above, but emanates from the individuals and communities that lie at the base of government structures, though these structures then tend to reinforce and sustain this parochialism if it is a valuable means of achieving or mobilizing power.

The fiercest parochial divide in Tasmania is that between the North and South of the island, something that has long historical roots.⁷¹ But parochialism also has a long history on the North West Coast, some suggesting that it is a millstone that for so long has been an impediment to coastal progress, and still lingers beneath the surface of coastal life.⁷² As Tanner notes, it is extraordinary that an island so small has been wracked for much of its European settlement by stubborn and persistent regional loyalties.⁷³

It was a question that intrigued the historian Henry Reynolds, who, in an influential article, examined the rise of regionalism in Tasmania during the nineteenth century.⁷⁴ He suggested that it can be understood in terms of the three different waves of settlement that swept across the colony at various points throughout this time. The first wave was pastoral settlement in the first half of the century, concentrated primarily around the Midlands; the second was the settlement for small farming purposes of heavily forested areas after the 1850s; the third was the rise of the mining industry along the West Coast at the close of the century. Each new frontier of settlement had its own problems, worries and demands that created divergent outlooks amongst its inhabitants.

⁷⁰ *Mercury*, 5 May 1998.

⁷¹ Tanner, 'Regionalism', pp. 57-58.

⁷² *The Advocate*, 21 June 1996.

⁷³ Tanner, 'Regionalism', p58.

⁷⁴ H. Reynolds, 'Regionalism in Nineteenth Century Tasmania', *THRAPP*, Vol. 17(1) 1969 pp. 14-28.

These outlooks then moulded the social and political culture of the colony and then state well into the twentieth century. Parochialism grew out of the competition between the cities for trade and prominence, and also from the inhabitants of the second and third frontiers of settlement contesting the entrenched power and interests of the rural gentry, who had settled the pastoral lands in the Midlands, and who, in the period between 1856 and the 1870s, had risen to assume political power in the colony.⁷⁵

Along with this analysis, it must be pointed out that within these regions existed smaller parochial units. Sharman notes historically that Tasmania, outside the two cities, has been characterized by a 'relatively large number of small and semi-autonomous communities'.⁷⁶ In the nineteenth century there were often sharp contrasts between these communities, even those in the same locality.⁷⁷ Insular towns were created because of many reasons, including geographical isolation, kinship around prominent families or a particular faith, or economic competition. A consequence of this insularity was localism. The term is often loosely defined, from 'a sense of place which can influence behaviour',⁷⁸ to a 'set of ideas which emphasize the importance of town identity, local progress and civic duty'.⁷⁹ It is usually seen as a product of physical isolation and a process of socialization that tends to be inward looking, and exhibits at a local level some characteristics of populism.⁸⁰ For the sake of simplicity the term will be used throughout this thesis to mean a distinctive awareness of a particular place and the differences

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 20-25.

⁷⁶ G. C. Sharman, 'Tasmania: the politics of brokerage', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, Vol. 53(9) 1977 p21.

⁷⁷ Reynolds, 'Regionalism', p18.

⁷⁸ G. Patmore, 'Localism and Lithgow, 1869-1932', *Labour History*, vol. 78, 2000, p53.

⁷⁹ E. Eklund, 'We are of age: class, locality and region at Port Kembla, 1900 to 1940', *ibid.*, vol. 66, 1994, p73.

⁸⁰ D. Aitken, *The Country Party in New South Wales: a study of organization and survival*, (Canberra 1972) p96; see also G. Stokes, 'One Nation and Australian populism' in Leach, M. Stokes, G. Ward, I. *The Rise and Fall of One Nation*, (St. Lucia 2000).

between it and its neighbours, and a sentiment which feels that the interests of 'locals' should be given the utmost consideration over all others most of the time. In politics, localism can evolve into parochialism, defined as a 'confinement of one's interests to a narrow sphere, with indifference to the world outside', or a 'local narrowness of view'.⁸¹

This thesis then seeks to address two issues. The first is to examine the connection between small, insular and parochial towns and the regional loyalties suggested by Reynolds. The second is then to use this information to suggest a reason why municipal councils have been so reluctant to amalgamate or accept wide-ranging reform. Due to the wide scope of the subject, it has been decided to limit the thesis to an examination of one region, the North West Coast, and one period, roughly between 1906 and 1939. Also due to time constraints it has been found necessary to study in depth only two councils in the North West at that time. These councils, Devonport and Leven, while neighbours, are characteristic of two types of councils found in the North West during this period. The Devonport council was an urban council, predominately made up from the centre, Devonport, which comprised four out of the council's five wards; while the Leven council was predominately a rural municipality with its urban centre Ulverstone comprising only one ward out of four. The North West has been chosen specifically for its long marked history as seeing itself as a distinctive region in the state. From a close study of these councils and the region general conclusions about the experience of municipal government in Tasmania have been made.

The time period too has been carefully chosen. In 1906 a local government bill was passed giving Tasmania for the first time a fully comprehensive system of municipal

⁸¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, 1989 vol. 11 p246.

government. It came into operation on 1 September 1907, with the new councils beginning their work on the 1 January 1908. This thesis revolves around this Act. A section of it outlines the reform attempts in Tasmania prior to 1906; another section examines the aftermath of municipal governance after the Act came into operation in 1908; the final section looks at the lead up and outcome to the first major review of the Act when a Royal Commission was set up to examine municipal councils in 1939. The period 1906 to 1939 then begins and ends with major milestones in municipal reform.

The primary sources used in this thesis have been local newspapers, parliamentary papers, and various archival records of local bodies and government ministers. The archival material on the Devonport and Leven councils, but on other bodies as well, often gives only a sketchy and rather superficial view of the municipal business conducted by these councils during this time. Accordingly, in order to achieve a fuller picture of what was occurring, it was necessary to trawl extensively through local newspapers and note local developments and opinions as they arose and how they shaped and affected municipal business. In many instances, due to their chronicling of daily life of small communities around the state and their strong interest in local political affairs, the newspapers of this era are an invaluable resource for researching local government in Tasmania.

The absence of a sole minister specifically in charge of local government affairs during this time creates certain difficulties in ascertaining government policy in relation to the municipal system. Usually local bodies were under the supervision of the Minister for Lands and Works. However, the Premier, Chief Secretary or Treasurer took an active and controlling interest in municipal affairs when they thought it necessary. Therefore,

archival materials from several departments and various official reports appearing in parliamentary journals have been used to determine the opinions of the government.

Due to the large scope of the subject, the thesis has been limited to examining reform, and not the functions and outcomes of municipal councils during this time. Excluded have been the Hobart and Launceston councils, urban councils with their own peculiar problems. It has also been limited to the experience of municipal councils in Tasmania, with only a modest comparison with other states occurring in the conclusion. This is a result of space, as any extensive comparison of the reform process in Tasmania with other states would require much more research time and words than were available. Instead, this thesis will hopefully complement the other historical studies of local government in various states that have been written.

This thesis will argue that local government reform in this period was driven by financial pressures, primarily from 'above', that is by higher levels of government, but increasingly also from below by the problems councils themselves were having in discharging their obligations satisfactorily. Here the important criterion guiding municipal reform was economy, ensuring that suitable municipal structures were formed that enabled councils to have adequate financial resources to carry out their duties. This often entailed the amalgamation of existing local bodies into larger more comprehensive structures. The attempts at municipal reform were frustrated, however, by the existing local bodies antagonism towards amalgamation, or any moves that threatened their existing interests. This arose out of their strict adherence to a second major criterion of municipal reform – the desire that municipal boundaries correspond with what was called a 'community of interest'. This was due considerably to the localism that existed

between town and town in Tasmania at that time. This tended to be reinforced by the adoption of municipal structures that created an inclination towards the *status quo* with a strong emphasis in preserving local interests.

The petty parochialism exhibited in small towns in the North West before 1918 manifested itself into a more structured, regional parochialism after the Great War, in response to developments in Tasmanian society after that time. Regionalism was adopted, not necessarily out of a realization that the coast was some sort of organic whole, but that it promised to deliver better returns to the smaller parochial units than their previous methods of organization. That is why municipal reform, encompassing amalgamation, which one might think would be more successful with a growing regional identity and a broader 'community of interest', was frustrated and ultimately failed: the municipal structures adopted in Tasmania tended to be inward looking and focused to serving local interests first and foremost.

To achieve its aims, the thesis has been split into seven chapters. The first highlights the competitive and often fragile nature of settlement on the North West during the colonial period and its broad implications for local government in the region. Due to a sympathy towards centralization, there was an apathy on the North West towards local institutions, particularly with the often precarious economic situation of the settler making self-responsibility under the local liability principle unrealistic. When local institutions did emerge they were often poorly funded and succumbed to the localism that existed on the North West at that time, due mainly to the local geography and the cultural differences between settlements in the region. The result was that the attempt to form

more comprehensive local government structures on the North West was beset with difficulties.

The second chapter outlines the history of municipal reform in Tasmania from 1865 to 1904, and then the creation and aftermath of the *Local Government Act* 1906. It argues that municipal reform during this time was driven by government desire for greater economy and efficiency, especially in times of economic difficulty.⁸² Reform was opposed, however, by a combination of ignorance and a general unwillingness to change to new and untested municipal structures. In order to pass any bill of reform through parliament the government was obliged to consult more widely with the existing local bodies and population, and make compromises between the claims of economy and efficiency on the one hand and ensuring a community of interest on the other.

The third chapter examines the attachment to the community of interest principle on the North West and its consequences for municipal reform. Settlements in the region believed that there existed different 'interests' that ideally should be separated and controlled by their own council. Having different interests together in one municipality would mean political problems hampering the efficiency of municipal business. That municipal boundaries should protect particular 'interests' fitted well into the localism prevalent on the North West. Its result, however, was to encourage parochialism in the outlook of the municipal councils, therefore fusing the structures of municipal government onto the localism existing in the region. The strong attachment to the community of interest principle had an affect on the prospects for municipal reform. It made municipal councils wary about proposals to alter municipal boundaries, as

⁸² See M. Roe, *The State of Tasmania: identity at federation time* (Sandy Bay 2001) ch. 1 & 4.

amalgamation threatened to undermine the principle that a local interest should be subjected to the political control by those who were most intimate with it.

The fourth chapter looks broadly at the North West in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the rise of regionalism and the municipal councils part in it. Faced with difficult times after the war, it was hoped that the adoption of regionalism would encourage the idea that the coast was an entity with common interests and objectives. However, the examples of civic and municipal bodies that organized on a regional basis suggest that localism eroded the notion of the coast as some sort of 'organic' whole. This was because benefits that were achieved by regionalism were often fought over at an intra-regional level, and parochialism often worked to undermine efforts of regional bodies. Localism and parochialism was still prevalent in the North West at this time, and municipal structures came to align themselves with it, often tending to reinforce and perpetuate it. This had consequences for municipal reform, as regionalism's failure to cultivate broader 'community of interest' between municipalities did little to encourage their amalgamation.

The fifth and sixth chapters examine the pressures that arose in the 1920s and 1930s that led the state government to propose substantial municipal reform in 1938. The fifth chapter looks at pressures from below, that is, from the operation and experiences of the municipal councils themselves. It will argue that rising overheads and lower revenues in the 1920s eventually led to some local bodies around the state ending up in serious financial trouble in the 1930s. The Labor government that came to power during this time was generally unsympathetic to the councils, and enacted legislation that replaced financially stricken councils with government-appointed commissions. The move was

generally unpopular, leaving the government to push for reform to make councils more financially viable. This idea was encouraged by the difficulty municipal councils came to have with road maintenance in the 1930s. The need for a modern road making plant was beyond most small councils and so tentative suggestions for the amalgamation of municipalities was made. It will conclude by examining how responsive to major administrative changes the municipal councils were, and what this meant for any attempt at reform.

The sixth chapter will examine the pressures from above, that is from the Commonwealth government, that were put on the state government to enact local government reform. It will argue that the re-structure of Commonwealth-state financial relations in the 1930s acted as an impetus towards reform. In the 1920s the state government attempted changes in the municipal system but made little headway. This was due to popular opinion in the 1920s blaming Federation and the Commonwealth for Tasmania's ills, and only reforms in that sphere would bring economic relief. In the 1930s, however, the state was forced to become more responsible for its financial problems, and to scrutinize its existing administrative practices. The problems of municipal councils naturally found themselves in the spotlight, and took the blame in the late 1930s for the reduction in Commonwealth financial assistance. As a result, the state government announced a Royal Commission to investigate how the existing municipal system could be reformed.

The final chapter examines the proceedings and outcome of this Royal Commission. It will argue that, while municipal councils were receptive to some reforms, they were antagonistic to the major focus of the Royal Commission – the amalgamation of some

municipalities. Faced with such an attitude, the Royal Commission produced a safe report, with some important administrative changes and the barest of amalgamations it thought could be reasonably enacted. But, like at the turn of the century and in the 1920s, the idea of amalgamation and comprehensive municipal reform was met with strident municipal opposition and an obstinate Legislative Council. The result was a compromise between the state government and municipal bodies and reform far below that planned initially by the Ogilvie government.

Chapter 1: North West Settlement and Local Institutions

An early European described the land between the Mersey River and Rocky Cape on the North West coast as 'mountainous, extremely barren, and locally unfit for habitation'.¹ Yet this did not stop the Van Diemen's Land company from settling the far North West corner from the 1820s² and an increasing number of men and women from the early 1850s from occupying land around Port Sorell, eventually extending along the coast and a considerable distance inland.³ The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the competitive and often fragile nature of settlement on the North West during the colonial period, and its broad implications for local government in the region. The difficulty in carving out and sustaining settlements in the rugged North West terrain prompted a reliance on central government for public works and other solutions to problems faced on the coast. The sympathy towards centralization consequently created apathy towards local institutions, particularly with the often-precarious economic situation of the settler making self-responsibility under the local liability principle unrealistic. When local institutions did emerge, they were often poorly funded and succumbed to the localism that existed on the North West at that time, due mainly to the local geography and the cultural differences between settlements in the region.

¹ Survey Office report: 'remarks upon the North Coast of Van Diemen's Land, 1824-6-7' by Captain Hardwickle, *Tasmania Legislative Council Journals*, 1861 (1) paper no. 16 p1.

² see W. M. Meston, *The Van Diemen's Land Company, 1825-1842*, (Launceston 195?); J. Jorgensen, *History of the Origin, Rise and Progress of the Van Diemen's Land Company*, (Hobart 1979); K. R. Von Steiglitz, *A Short History of Circular Head and its Pioneers, also of the V.D.L. company*, (Tasmania, 1956). K. Pink, *And Wealth and Toil: A History of North West and Western Tasmania 1825-1900*, (Burnie 1990).

³ see J. Fenton, *Bush Life in Tasmania*, (Devonport 1964); see also 'Early settlements on the river Mersey' R. P. Crompton, *Daily Telegraph*, 30 January 1884; and J. R. Skemp, *North West History 1800-1945*, (unpublished manuscript) *University of Tasmania Archives*, 5/12/1(8).

The result was that the attempt to form more comprehensive local government structures was beset with difficulties, as the examples to form the town of Devonport and rural municipalities at Port Sorell, Circular Head, and Latrobe will show.

North West Settlement and Localism

Stokes has noted how the pattern of settlement in the early North West was 'dictated by soil and geography', with a series of independent wedges created around rivers and a coastal port.⁴ The lands of the North West were opened up as a deliberate policy of the government to attract immigrants and halt the exodus of the young from the colony, and the early settlements were based around farming potatoes and creating palings to sell to the mainland during the goldrushes.⁵ Taking advantage of liberal regulations, speculators grabbed large tracts of land on the coastal fringe in the early 1850s, and those small settlers who wanted land later in the decade were forced back a considerable distance from coastal ports.⁶

These settlers, already encumbered with the high cost of clearing forest land for farming purposes, were further disadvantaged by the difficulty and expense of getting their crops to a port in order to be shipped to market.⁷ By 1857 residents were petitioning parliament for better roads or a tramway, with the state of existing roads making it impossible to

⁴ H. J. W. Stokes, 'North West Tasmania 1858-1910: The Establishment of an Agricultural Community', (Australian National University PhD Thesis 1969) p29.

⁵ Stokes, *ibid.*, p31; W. A. Townsley, 'Tasmania and the Great Economic Depression 1858-1871', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, (THRAPP) vol. 4 1955 pp. 35-46.

⁶ Stokes, *ibid.*, p31.

⁷ *ibid.*, p57.

convey produce to market during a greater portion of the year.⁸ In 1860 the surveyor Ronald C. Gunn told parliament that North West lands were 'now entirely shut off from the inspection of intending settlers by dense scrubs and forests which deter men from venturing far from the beaten tracks'.⁹ Public infrastructure such as roads and bridges became essential to the progress of the coast, in getting produce to markets and expanding settlement.¹⁰ Petitions for more roads were sent in 1865¹¹ and 1869, the latter stressing that 'the want of a good main line of road to the settled districts in the interior is a very serious drawback to the prosperity, business and comfort of the inhabitants of the coast'.¹²

The residents were frustrated by government policy. A fall in land sales in the region in the 1860s saw a reduction in government spending with diminished revenue¹³ and, as Stokes notes, the prohibitive cost of constructing roads and tramways in the terrain saw a general trend of government building roads after land selections had been made, rather than before.¹⁴ Such a policy was unlikely to bring many enthusiastic settlers to the region, as prospective settlers were reluctant to purchase land without a certain guarantee that roads would be built. When money was found for public works, it was usually blocked in the Legislative Council with its members rigidly sticking to the principle that

⁸ 'Petition: from certain owners and occupiers of land in the Road Districts of Devon, Midhurst, Chudleigh and Upper Meander', *Tasmania: Journal and Printed Papers of Parliament* JPPP(Tas), 1857 (2) paper no. 86.

⁹ 'Roads Between the Mersey and Leven: Mr. Gunn's Report', *ibid.*, 1860 paper no. 7.

¹⁰ see *Launceston Examiner*, 19 July 1862.

¹¹ 'Petition: from Port Sorell for reproductive works', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1865 paper no. 23.

¹² 'Port Frederick and River Mersey: Petition for Main Road', *ibid.*, 1869 paper no. 100.

¹³ Stokes, 'North West Tasmania 1858-1910', p66.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p86.

responsibility for public works should be borne by the residents themselves and not the government.¹⁵

As will be seen in the next chapter, the government had provided for districts to form rural municipalities if they so wished to manage their local affairs and bear responsibility for public works. This was enthusiastically taken up by settlers in the Midlands and around Launceston and Hobart, primarily flat plains with well-established roads and bridges that had been built in convict times.¹⁶ This was in contrast to conditions in the North West. Settlers there were less inclined to form strong municipal bodies and tended to favour centralization. This was due to a dependence on central government created by local geography and the nature of an agricultural economy. Roads and bridges were expensive to build in the rugged terrain, and it was quicker and more efficient to have government in control of the works. The North West economy was based primarily around cash crops, which required favourable markets on the mainland and government pressure on the mainland colonies to keep their duties on produce down.¹⁷ Successful long term settlement on the North West was also dependent on the way the government granted and structured the repayment of land purchases.

Therefore, with such a dependence on the central government, settlers on the North West put much effort into ensuring that one of 'their own' was put into parliament to look after their interests.¹⁸ This was achieved with the redrawing of electoral boundaries to

¹⁵ *ibid*, p60.

¹⁶ H Reynolds, 'Regionalism in Nineteenth Century Tasmania', *THRAPP*, 17(1) 1969 p17.

¹⁷ Stokes, 'North West Tasmania 1858-1910', p56; see also *Launceston Examiner*, 15 February 1862.

¹⁸ see G. Rootes, 'Regional influences on political perspectives: William Moore and colonial Tasmania, 1871-1909', (University of Tasmania BA Hons thesis 2001) chapter 1.

reflect the growth of population in the area in the 1870s, and thereafter the coast loved nothing more than the old 'roads and bridges' member who was strident in pushing for greater public works programmes in the North West and around the state.¹⁹ The difficulty then in carving out and sustaining settlements in the North West terrain prompted a reliance upon and sympathy towards central government providing solutions to the coast's problems.

The effect of this was to create a general apathy towards local institutions. The *Devon Herald* remarked that the meetings of such bodies were 'as a rule miserably attended, and we think that if more interest was manifested in them there would be less grumbling'.²⁰ This apathy was caused not only by the reliance on government funds for public works, but also on the reluctance of settlers on the North West to bear self-responsibility under the local liability principle. Small settlers and the few wealthy landholders were unwilling to bear the whole burden of the considerable expense for public works in the region,²¹ and the fluctuating economic situation of settlers made the local liability principle often untenable.

Economies based on cash crops thrive when supply is plenty and demand is high, and decline when both supply and demand are low. The coast in its first fifty years experienced good and bad seasons and vibrant and stagnant markets. The 1850s were a time of growth supplying the Victorian goldfields, and the 1860s a steady decline, leading to great financial hardship in the 1870s. The growth of the mining industry heralded another boom in the 1880s followed by the demoralizing effect of the

¹⁹ see Rootes, 'Regional influences', chapter 2; Stokes 'North West Tasmania 1858-1910', chapter 5.

²⁰ *Devon Herald*, 8 May 1885.

²¹ Stokes, 'North West Tasmania 1858-1910', pp. 57-63

depression in the 1890s. In good times the average settler, a man of 'humble means and origin' as Stokes put it,²² was able to clear his debts and live in a little more comfort. Bad times saw him struggle immensely and having the few wealthy landholders demand extra taxation for local projects was often resented.²³

The general instability of the coastal economy did not lend itself well to local self-responsibility, a point borne out by those bodies that did form on the coast. These were often poorly and inadequately funded for the tasks that they were designated to do, and often succumbed to the localism of different settlements in the North West, the significance of which will be explained in the next chapter. Here it is important to explain why localism emerged in the North West, and the effect it had on attitudes in the region.²⁴

Localism grew out of the fragile nature of North West settlements. The contrasting fortunes of those settlements in the Mersey district provide an example. Without doubt Devonport and Ulverstone grew rapidly in population and economic terms from the 1870s onwards.²⁵ In 1870 *Walch's Almanac* tentatively estimated the population of the towns in the area as being Torquay 182, Formby 76, Forth 45, Latrobe 71 and Ulverstone 25, noting however that these centres were steadily expanding.²⁶ By 1891 such a

²² *ibid.*, p46

²³ see the experience with local board of works in the 1870s, Stokes, *ibid.*, p205

²⁴ for a account of localism in New South Wales in the 1850s see G. R. Quaife, 'Make Us Roads No Matter How: a note on colonial politics', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 15 1969 pp. 47-54.

²⁵ For a history of Devonport, see C. J. Binks, *The story of Devonport*, (Devonport 1981); Advocate, *Devonport: 100 years of progress* (Burnie 1990); D. B Reid, *The evolution of Devonport*, (Devonport 1981). For a history of Ulverstone see B. Ellis, *Ulverstone: an outline of its history*, (Ulverstone 1988); Ulverstone History Museum, *Sesqui-centenary of Ulverstone, 1852-2002* (Ulverstone 2002); T. Large, *Ulverstone Sunshine and Storm: Glimpses of a small Tasmanian Town 1920-1940*, (Ulverstone 2004).

²⁶ *Walch's Almanac*, 1870, p184.

prediction was realised with East Devonport (formerly Torquay) now containing 559 persons, West Devonport (formerly Formby) 1246, Forth 114, Latrobe 1560 and Ulverstone 1129.²⁷ By 1911, Devonport could boast 3620 people, Latrobe 1355, Forth 260 and Ulverstone 2005.²⁸ By the turn of the century Devonport was described as 'one of the leading centres of trade, commerce and population on the island...it is clearly the most important shipping port on the North West Coast, and possesses a harbor at the present time second to none in Northern Tasmania'.²⁹ Ulverstone, too, was seen as a 'thriving seaport' and ranked behind Devonport and Burnie as the most important port on the coast.³⁰

The expansion of Devonport and Ulverstone over their neighbours was aided by the great improvements made in land transport infrastructure in the North West. In the early period of settlement rudimentary roads and animal-drawn transport meant that settlements and port facilities were necessary alongside areas where raw materials, mainly potatoes and palings, were being extracted. This was a characteristic common to the townships most prominent in the coast at that time – Forth, Don, Latrobe and Torquay.

Forth was the second settlement in Devon after a Port Sorell settler purchased land there in 1839. A township reserve was marked off around 1852, and first sales of land were held in Launceston in 1855.³¹ From there the township steadily grew, benefiting from the more liberal land laws in the 1850s and boasting at one stage two of perhaps the most

²⁷ *Tasmanian Census*, 1891, p23ff.

²⁸ *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 3rd April 1911.

²⁹ *The Cyclopaedia of Tasmania*, Vol. II (Hobart 1900) p248.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p270.

³¹ C. Ramsay, *With the Pioneers*, (Hobart 1957) p87.

influential people in the early history of the North West – James Fenton and James Smith.³² Its success was based on a thriving port trade when ‘every season boat after boat would leave the port laden with produce or palings, and the township was a hive of industry, with plenty of money in circulation, and there was a regular line of sailing craft between Melbourne, Launceston and the Forth’.³³ A large boot factory also employed many people and necessitated several boarding houses and hotels.³⁴

The settlement of Don, lying on the river that bore the same name, has a similar story to that of Forth.³⁵ Originally settled around 1840, the Don township prospered with the erection of the Huxtable and Cummings saw-mill. The Don quickly became the industrial hub for an extensive area with shops, stores, and factories for the surrounding rural population. The town was built on the back of a prolific timber industry and later coal was discovered and extracted by the Don company.³⁶ For twenty years the Don was perhaps the busiest place on the North West coast,³⁷ the timber industry requiring the construction of wharves, ships and the deepening of the entrance to the river.³⁸ A tramline was built back into the Barrington and Melrose districts that enabled produce from surrounding settlers to be sent to the harbour for export.³⁹

Latrobe was marked off as a township in 1851, but as late as 1870 had only a population of 71 people. However, coalmines built on and around the Mersey River closed down

³² see Fenton, *Bush Life in Tasmania* and Ramsay, *With the Pioneers*, chapters IV and VI; see also N. Haygarth, ‘The “Father of Tasmania”?: measuring the legend of James “Philosopher” Smith’, (University of Tasmania PhD thesis 2003)

³³ *North West Post*, 8 May 1908.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 23 February 1914.

³⁵ For a history of the Don, see F. Gardam, *Sawdust, Sails and Sweat: a history of the river Don settlement, North West Coast*, (Devonport 1996).

³⁶ Ramsay, *With the Pioneers*, p102.

³⁷ *North West Post*, 4 December 1908.

³⁸ Ramsay, *With the Pioneers*, p106.

³⁹ *North West Post*, 24 March 1915.

around this time, sparking an exodus from the speckled settlements on the coalfields to Latrobe. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s it grew to become the principal town on the North West coast and the principal centre for sport and culture in the region.⁴⁰ The town quickly became the dominant commercial centre during the 1870s and the newly founded Mersey Marine Board – to be quickly dominated by merchants from Latrobe – extended this prosperity by substantially upgrading the port facilities around Latrobe creek. Indeed, much of the Mersey Marine Board's time, money and energy went into making Latrobe creek a shipping place.⁴¹ Torquay was the settlement on the Eastern side of the Mersey river which developed quickly because of its surrounding cleared and settled land and wharves, while the Western side of the river was hampered by being heavily forested. As a consequence, Torquay became the headquarters of the police, courthouse, post office, flourmill, public house and church in the area.⁴²

Formby, on the Western side of the Mersey River, did not develop at this time because it had no hinterland of its own to exploit when Don, Latrobe and Torquay dominated the areas around it.⁴³ But the spread of railways, tramways and better roads around the district removed this obstacle. The town could exist solely as a trade centre⁴⁴ and the hinterland had no need for close shipping facilities when it became easier and more profitable to move larger quantities of produce to bigger ports for shipping. Bennett calls the decision in 1882 to build the railway to Formby 'the most momentous in the history of the Devon region, as the result was that a new town grew up which left all others

⁴⁰ see Ramsay, *With the Pioneers*, Chapter X.

⁴¹ M. Bennett, *The Quiet Achievers: the history of the port of Devonport*, (Launceston 1995) p38.

⁴² *Mercury*, 24 June 1914.

⁴³ Bennett, *The Quiet Achievers* p49.

⁴⁴ *North West Chronicle*, 11 July 1887.

behind'.⁴⁵ Don declined as businessmen and residents relocated to Formby,⁴⁶ and the high maintenance required for the port of the mouth of the river Don came to be no longer justified.⁴⁷ Timber resources had also been depleted and the timber mills shut down.⁴⁸ At Forth the building of a drawbridge at the mouth of the Forth River that enabled the railway to continue westward hindered the passage of ships to the township.⁴⁹ The timber that had been used in the paling trade too had been exhausted and the township 'sank into insignificance'.⁵⁰ The growth of Formby understandably saw the demand for all the public institutions found on the Eastern shore and most were removed from that location and relocated over the river. Eventually in the words of the *Mercury*, 'everything of importance, or that had long lent dignity to the settlement of the East bank was removed', and consequently, 'Torquay became only a name'.⁵¹

Another reason for the rise of Devonport and Ulverstone was the advantages held by the harbours they lived by. The progress of Latrobe was continually hampered by ships having difficulty navigating through the Mersey river and parliament was instructed to look into the matter.⁵² It decided, in lieu of increasing shipping technology that prevented larger ships from entering far up the Mersey, to utilize the mouth of the river as a deep-water port.⁵³ In the following decades, the Mersey Marine Board made considerable advances in improving the wharf and rail facilities, and the accessibility of the river that kept pace with the increasing size in vessels and frequently of traffic

⁴⁵ Bennett, *The Quiet Achievers*, p49.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

⁴⁷ F. Gardam, *Shifting Sands: a history of the Mersey river Devonport*, (Devonport 2001) p58.

⁴⁸ Bennett, *The Quiet Achievers*, p63.

⁴⁹ *North West Post*, 8 May 1908.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *Mercury*, 24 June 1914.

⁵² Bennett, *The Quiet Achievers*, pp. 45-48.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p60.

coming into the harbor. Similar strident efforts were made also to improve the Leven harbour, although the Leven Harbor Trust was often hamstrung by an absence of funds, infighting and disputes with the Mersey Marine Board.

Devonport and Ulverstone were better equipped to handle growth and prosperity because the existing ports in the small townships had limits on their development that were exposed by the increase in the number of ships engaged in the coastal trade and the improving technology and size of the vessels. If, in heavily forested country, water was the main method of transport, communication and commerce,⁵⁴ then 'big steamers sounded the death knell of the smaller ports and doomed to relative stagnation the townships which lived upon them'.⁵⁵ The roots then of the insularity, parochialism and local jealousy that characterized the North West during this period lies in the rather fluid way settlements could rise and fall in the region. The settlements at Don, Torquay, Forth and Latrobe did not decline directly because of the rise of another region in Tasmania or of another colony, but because of the rise of their immediate neighbour. This, along with the reliance on government funds and the fact that often their livelihoods were based around the sometimes-unstable extraction of materials (be that produce or minerals) from their local terrain, created a certain sense of insecurity and vulnerability. It often made North West settlements particularly aware to protect or preserve their local economic interests, and attuned them to the deficiencies in their local geography that hindered economic development.

North West settlements also tended to have social and cultural differences that, combined with physical isolation, helped sharpen local identities. Reynolds noted that

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p13.

⁵⁵ Stokes, 'North West Tasmania 1858-1910', p89.

'the visitor of the seventies or eighties who travelled the 70 odd miles from Longford to Ulverstone passed through districts which were as different from one another as any two communities in nineteenth century Australia'.⁵⁶ While it is important not to over-emphasize this point, the 1911 census shows that there were subtle differences between each of the municipalities of the North West. For example Kentish, Leven and Penguin consisted predominately of Tasmanian-born residents, with Devonport and Circular Head less so. Devonport and Latrobe had a higher proportion of people born overseas than the other centres. Penguin had considerably less people who could read and write than the other municipalities. In terms of religious composition, Circular Head was predominately Anglican and the centre of Presbyterianism on the coast, the rural districts of Leven and Kentish had a strong Methodist presence, Methodists outnumbered Anglicans in Penguin, and the Devonport and Emu Bay municipalities had a more heterogeneous mix of religions. The residents of the Devonport, Latrobe and Penguin municipalities were comparatively older than their counterparts along the coast, and the Western half of the North West from Emu Bay onwards tended to have more people aged between 20 and 44 than the Eastern portion.⁵⁷ Localism, as noted in the Introduction as being a particular awareness of place and the differences between it and its neighbours, arose then from a combination of strong local identities being formed with a sense of the fragile or fluid way settlements could prosper or decline in the North West.

Its most significant result was to localize the idea of economic development or progress. On the North West, 'frontier' settlements could rise and fall by the amount of effort put in by its residents, by how well (or not so well) they exploited the natural geography around

⁵⁶ Reynolds, 'Regionalism' p18.

⁵⁷ *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 3rd April 1911, Volumes II and III.

them, and with a touch of luck or political influence in parliament. This, coupled with the classic nineteenth and early twentieth century notion of progress – the ever improving nature of human history⁵⁸ – fostered pride and resilience in North West settlements rather than resignation or defeatism. Rather than humbly accept the rising prominence of Devonport, residents of Forth and Latrobe steadfastly clung to the identity of their towns and vowed to return them to centres of distinction. The *Post* described the whole outlook in 1913:

on the other hand there are a few notable instances of clever and untiring men of brains and ability who are leaving no stone unturned to develop the resources of their respective districts, just from the love of work and from the desire to see their own towns keeping a prominent place in the steady pace of progress which is now taking place from Port Sorell to Mount Balfour. In passing it is refreshing to note this healthy rivalry between town and town and district and district, for this is a rivalry which is distinctly good and desirable...when every man resolves to do his best in his own little corner, the resultant aggregate of good work accomplish necessarily becomes much greater than if merely a few are working. One activity creates another, one man enthuses another, one town resolves not to be left behind another, and so the race for the 'progress stakes' goes merrily on.⁵⁹

The outcome of this localism, however, was the prevalence of parochialism, insularity and competition between different centres on the North West. The *Daily Telegraph* noted in 1889 that 'one of the misfortunes attendant of the rapid progress of the North West Coast is the spread of miserable localism and petty jealousies of each centre against its immediate neighbours. The old North versus South feeling...was as "moonlight unto sunlight" compared with the bitter animosities existing between some of the North West

⁵⁸ see M. Ginsberg, *The Idea of Progress*, (Westport 1972); L. Sklair, *The Sociology of Progress*, (London 1970); W. Wagar (ed.), *The Idea of Progress since the Renaissance*, (New York 1969); S. Pollard, *The Idea of Progress: history and society*, (London 1968); S. MacIntyre, *A Colonial Liberalism: the lost world of three Victorian visionaries* (South Melbourne 1991).

⁵⁹ *North West Post*, 31 December 1913.

centres'.⁶⁰ Localism, along with sympathy towards centralization and apathy towards local institutions, created problems in attempts to form more comprehensive local government structures.

Early attempts of municipal government in the North West

Early attempts to form rural municipalities on the North West were hampered by opposition based on expense and a disinclination to assume complete responsibility for local matters. The North West instead adopted the various *ad-hoc* local authorities that allowed some control over local matters while not being encumbered by large financial burdens. Roads trusts, beginning in 1852 with the Devon Road Trust, were formed to maintain roads in the region, and marine boards and harbor trusts were established for port improvements. Town boards were formed in the townships of Formby and Ulverstone in May 1888. These boards arose from a combination of factors: the expansion of the townships in the early 1880s; the railway being built to Formby and eventually along the coast to Emu Bay that promised greater prosperity and population growth;⁶¹ the summer drought of 1887-8 with outbreaks of diphtheria;⁶² and the limitations of road trusts concerned only with rural roads. Town boards were wanted to aid the development of Formby and Ulverstone, particularly by improving the supply of water and means of drainage.⁶³ These local bodies, funded primarily by the government with only small local contributions, were favoured to rural municipalities.

⁶⁰ as reported in the *North West Post*, 30 July 1889.

⁶¹ see *Launceston Examiner*, 1 April 1888, 7 May 1888.

⁶² see *ibid.*, 29 March 1888, 14 April 1888.

⁶³ see *ibid.*, 18 October 1886, 15 January 1887, 5 May 1888.

The inhabitants of the North West first entertained the idea of forming a rural municipality when the government passed a law in 1858 allowing them to do so. Petitions were circulated advocating the move but local opinion was divided on the matter and the movement faltered. It was revived in late 1859, after some grumblings about the conduct of the local police magistrate, which aroused a desire to have management of local affairs. In November 1859 a local electioneering committee, whose job it was to assess and gather support for candidates running for parliament, took on the responsibility of gathering signatures for the police district of Port Sorell to become a rural municipality.⁶⁴ This was duly done and was published on 17 January 1860.⁶⁵ The petition was signed by 125 men out of 170 eligible residents, and was warmly welcomed by the *Launceston Examiner*.⁶⁶

But there was lively opposition to the petition in the Mersey district. Its backers were described by one supporter of change as being ‘a party that wish things to remain as they are rather than risk the introduction of the class of men into power that would come between them and their vested right to rule as they may think, most advantageous for their private interests and self esteem’.⁶⁷ Though some opponents of the scheme were concerned only that the petition had been sent without being approved at a public meeting,⁶⁸ the rest were accused of unnecessary scare-mongering about the consequences of becoming a municipality. This included warnings about high rates and expenditure along with ulterior motives by those who championed the change.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ ‘Rural Municipalities’ A Ratepaying Resident, *ibid.*, 7 February 1860.

⁶⁵ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 17 January 1860, see also *Launceston Examiner*, 19 January 1860.

⁶⁶ *Launceston Examiner*, 4 February 1860.

⁶⁷ ‘Rural Municipalities’ A Ratepaying Resident, *ibid.*, 7 February 1860.

⁶⁸ ‘Rural Municipality’ Enquirer, *ibid.*, 7 February 1860.

⁶⁹ ‘Port Sorell Municipality’, A Small Elector, *ibid.*, 25 February 1860.

By February 1860 a counter petition had been circulated and freely signed, stressing that a rural municipality would be 'highly detrimental to the interests and prosperity of the district'.⁷⁰ One local observer noted a 'great diversity of opinion' on the matter in the area, adding 'the extreme advocates promise local exemption from all rates, and the extreme opponents prophesize misrule, if not no rule at all'.⁷¹

Despite initial optimism that the municipality would be granted,⁷² the large size of the counter-petition resulted in the failure of the proposal.⁷³ Unperturbed, supporters for a rural municipality sent another petition in December 1860 containing 123 names⁷⁴ and another one in June 1862.⁷⁵ But opposition was still strong against the proposal, opponents alleging that the size of the new municipality would be so large as to make the duties of councillors near impossible to discharge, and that higher local taxes would invariably result. A counter petition of some 155 names was sent in August 1862.⁷⁶ With doubts over 118 names on the original petition, the government refused the move for a rural municipality encompassing the police district of Port Sorell.⁷⁷

The next attempt came from some residents at Circular Head. In April 1866 a petition of 66 names was sent to the government requesting the district be declared a rural municipality.⁷⁸ While the government considered the petition, it was alerted in early July

⁷⁰ 'Port Sorell Rural Municipality', *JPPP(Tas)* 1860 paper no. 27 p8

⁷¹ 'Port Sorell municipal electors', [unsigned], *Launceston Examiner*, 18 February 1860.

⁷² see 'To the Mersey municipal electors', An Elector, *ibid.*, 22 March 1860.

⁷³ See 'Port Sorell Rural Municipality', *JPPP(Tas)* 1860 paper no. 27 p 17; see also *Archives Office of Tasmania* (AOT), Colonial Secretary Department: General Correspondence files, Port Sorell Rural Municipality file, (Ref: CSD 1 file no. 5101).

⁷⁴ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 25 December 1860.

⁷⁵ AOT, Colonial Secretary Department: General Correspondence files, Port Sorell Rural Municipality file, petition to Colonial Secretary Office 2 June 1862, (Ref: CSD 4/79 file 248).

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, CSD 4/79 file 248, petition to Colonial Secretary Office, 8 August 1862.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, CSD 4/79 file 248, letter from Colonial Secretary Office to Joh. Jowett, 12 September 1862.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, Colonial Secretary Department: General Correspondence files, Circular Head Rural Municipality file, petition to Colonial Secretary Office 21 April 1866, (Ref: CSD 4/79 file 1067).

to the significant controversy that had erupted in Circular Head at the publication of the petition in the *Hobart Town Gazette*.⁷⁹ A Stanley shopkeeper, John Edwards, wrote to the government alleging that the prominent agitator for the municipality, one Henry James Emmett, told him that through a falling out with the local police magistrate H. T. A. Murray, Emmett was now advocating a municipality out of spite towards him. Edwards also alleged that Emmett had declared that no more than half a dozen people in the settlement were fit for election to a council.⁸⁰ Emmett's credibility took a further beating when a counter-petition was presented to the government in early August, containing 38 names of men who signed the original petition. They claimed that Emmett and another man had taken them to a public house, plied them with liquor, and then presented them with a petition that they had 'signed in total ignorance'.⁸¹

Instead the counter-petitioners admitted 'in this isolated district there are very few that have the faintest idea of what municipal action means'.⁸² Another letter stressed the introduction of municipal institutions in the district 'would be detrimental to the interests of your petitioners and the inhabitants of the district generally'.⁸³ Containing 100 names to the original petition's 11, the counter-petitioners wishes were granted and a rural municipality at Circular Head did not go ahead.⁸⁴ Despite growing settlement of the region, the settlers of the North West in the 1860s had no strong desire to accept full responsibility for local matters.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, CSD 4/79 file 1067, John Edwards to Colonial Secretary, 10 July 1866.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*, CSD 4/79 file 1067, petition to Colonial Secretary Office, 4 August 1866.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*, CSD 4/79 file 1067, letter to Colonial Secretary Office, 9 August 1866.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, CSD 4/79 file 1067, Colonial Secretary to H. J. Emmett, 18 August 1866.

The next attempt at creating a rural municipality occurred in the Latrobe area. A move towards a municipality encompassing the then electoral district of East Devon and the parish of Barrington, was made in 1873⁸⁵ and a formal petition was presented to the government in 1874.⁸⁶ No action was initially taken by the government⁸⁷ until 1876 when residents became frustrated in their attempts to improve the poor state of the Latrobe Bridge and surrounding roads in the area.⁸⁸ The government had the 1874 petition scrutinized, with the local police magistrate casting doubt on its validity, noting it did not contain ‘the educated portion’ of the population.⁸⁹ Out of 311 names only 104 were fully qualified under the regulations of the 1865 *Rural Municipalities Act*.⁹⁰ Another petition containing 93 names was subsequently presented desiring a rural municipality to be formed.⁹¹ It met considerable opposition from the more wealthy landholders in the area, who presented a petition stressing that the population of the Mersey though numerous was widely scattered and comprised ‘chiefly of small farmers and labourers’ who had ‘neither time nor inclination to attend to local self-government’.⁹² Most likely, in desperate economic circumstances, the wealthy residents did not want to be saddled with the entire cost of running the municipality. Having 106 names, the wish of that petition was granted.⁹³

⁸⁵ B. Travers Solly to Minister of Lands and Works, 17 October 1873, ‘East Devon: Municipal Action’, *JPPP(Tas)*, 1877, paper no. 6 p3.

⁸⁶ J. M. Dooley to Colonial Secretary, 12 April 1876, *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Launceston Examiner*, 18 May 1876.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 3 June 1876, 3 August 1876.

⁸⁹ Thomas A. Murray to Thos. Reibey, 7 November 1876, and Thomas A. Murray to B. Travers Solly, 20 November 1876, ‘East Devon: Municipal Action’, *JPPP(Tas)*, 1877 paper no. 6 p4.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p6.

⁹² *ibid.*, p6.

⁹³ *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

There the matter rested until May 1884, when the growing size and prominence of the town saw the movement for a rural municipality re-emerge.⁹⁴ A public meeting was held and passed a resolution favouring a municipality 46 votes to 14,⁹⁵ and a petition signed by a broad representation of 98 ratepayers was submitted to the government.⁹⁶ Opposition to this petition came not from other ratepayers in the Latrobe area as before, but from other areas who were to be included in the new municipality, particularly Torquay, but also the parishes of Stoodley and Dulverton⁹⁷ and those in Barrington and Spreyton.⁹⁸

The residents of Torquay opposed their inclusion in the municipality for various reasons. One resident remarked that the 'people of Torquay were all opposed to municipal action, as they were quite satisfied with existing arrangements'.⁹⁹ Most questioned the motives of the Latrobe townsmen that were behind the measure. John Henry, who led the Torquay opposition, warned of the 'octopus like grasping of the municipality petitioners of Latrobe, who were straining every nerve to annex parts of the district like Torquay'.¹⁰⁰ Opinions differed as to why Latrobe wanted to rule Torquay. Some saw it as a desire by domineering Latrobe townsmen to control those in its surrounding areas,¹⁰¹ while a more realistic fear was that areas outside Latrobe would be taxed to pay for amenities such as sewerage, water and lights in the town.¹⁰² As one

⁹⁴ see 'East Devon Municipality', Jew Fish, *Devon Herald*, 27 May 1884.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 30 May 1884.

⁹⁶ 'Municipal Action: petition from Port Sorell', *JPPF(Tas)*, 1885, paper no. 84 p4.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p5.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p7.

⁹⁹ *Devon Herald*, 30 May 1884, see also 29 July 1884.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 28 November 1884.

¹⁰¹ see 'Latrobe Municipality' An Elector of East Devon, Formby, *Daily Telegraph* 23 May 1884; and *Devon Herald*, 28 November 1884.

¹⁰² *Daily Telegraph*, 18 June 1884.

correspondent angrily put it: 'let the townspeople put their hands in their own pockets to cleanse and improve their town, and not try to make their neighbours pay for what they ought to do themselves'.¹⁰³

Moreover, the municipal boundary would divide Torquay and Formby, whose residents were now becoming more aware of their identical interests and common future.¹⁰⁴ In contrast, Torquay, according to John Henry, 'had no single interest in common with Latrobe'.¹⁰⁵ This desire to have municipal boundaries correspond with like-interests between settlements was important to residents at this time. The counter petition to the government from Torquay residents warned 'that strenuous opposition will be offered to Latrobe cutting off and carving up the district in any manner they may think proper, without in the least consulting the interest of the districts affected or allowing them a voice in the matter'.¹⁰⁶ The principles then behind the idea of local self-government required that it be not forced upon the people or constructed in an arbitrary or wanton way. The petition thus concluded that:

If it is the wish of the government that country centres should become municipalities, we trust we shall at least have the freedom of inviting the union of such as might work in harmony, without attempting to coerce with a high hand any outside districts in a detestable and impractical union, to be followed by disunion upon the first opportunity, the latter course we are now endeavoring to avoid.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ 'Latrobe Municipality' An Elector of East Devon, Formby, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 1884.

¹⁰⁴ see *Devon Herald*, 28 November 1884, and 'Municipal Action: petition from Port Sorell', *JPPP(Tas)* 1885 paper no. 84 p6.

¹⁰⁵ *Devon Herald*, 28 November 1884.

¹⁰⁶ 'Municipal Action: petition from Port Sorell', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1885, paper no.84 p6.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

These would become prophetic words when a more comprehensive scheme of local government was attempted in 1906. But they were also successful in 1884, with counter petitions being signed by 109 ratepayers resulting in the municipality not going ahead.¹⁰⁸

Having scuttled a Latrobe municipality, Henry then set about uniting the townships of Formby and Torquay, something discussed around Formby in the early 1880's and once a subject of a lecture at the Devon Institute.¹⁰⁹ The matter was revisited in early 1889 when increasing problems were encountered in crossing the Mersey leading to a movement desiring a solid bridge over the river. If this were to happen it would bring the townships of Formby and Torquay closer together and be a preliminary step to creating eventually an united town.¹¹⁰

In June 1889 the Formby Town Board received an requisition from residents desiring the amalgamation of the townships.¹¹¹ At public meetings to discuss the proposal advocates stressed the numerous advantages that union would bring. Current municipal expenses would be cut and more efficiently managed by one governing body and one officer in control of the works. Greater facilities were needed for both the growing towns such as street lighting, the establishment of public gardens, a water supply, and a sewerage scheme.¹¹² Rather than have two localities battling for limited funds, a united town would mean greater borrowing powers to carry out these improvements.

Most significantly, union would bring prestige and prosperity. When the Latrobe municipality was being debated, a correspondent from Latrobe wrote a mocking letter to

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p3.

¹⁰⁹ *North West Post*, 11 June 1889.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, 24 May 1889.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 8 June 1889.

¹¹² *ibid.*, 11 June 1889.

the *Daily Telegraph* opining that 'one need not be a prophet to say that Latrobe will be a flourishing city, with Formby remaining a depot for its convenience, attracting the extra glory of a struggling watering place or a summer resort for invalids'.¹¹³ A united town would put Latrobe in its place and become the third largest town in Tasmania, meaning in Henry's words 'that their political power would be doubled and their demands met with a readier attention by reason of the increased show they could make because of rateable property'.¹¹⁴ Another earnest advocate for the cause W. D. Stewart of Torquay believed a new town of Devonport would 'prosper beyond all expectations'.¹¹⁵

While Formby residents were enthusiastic for union, those in Torquay were less so. The *Post* most feared that the 'greedy monster' of Formby was determined to swallow up the poor little Torquay township, taking her rates to improve only the Western side of the river.¹¹⁶ A portion of the residents as well remained unconvinced of the need for a bridge, preferring instead to put the money into an improved ferry service across the river and a rail to the back districts.¹¹⁷ Like the previous opposition to its incorporation in a Latrobe municipality, Torquay residents feared that they would be dominated or unjustly treated entering into a partnership with a larger town. A petition against the union was circulated¹¹⁸ with the main sticking points being how rates would be expended in any union and how present and future facilities and amenities would be distributed between both sides of the river.¹¹⁹ The *Mercury* noted rumours also that prominent Latrobe

¹¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, 27 May 1884.

¹¹⁴ *North West Post*, 11 June 1889.

¹¹⁵ *ibid*

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, 15 June 1889.

¹¹⁷ 'The Union of Formby and Torquay', *Non Unionist*, *ibid*, 27 June 1889.

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, 16 July 1889.

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, 25 July 1889, see also 'Matters at Torquay and Amalgamation', *A Poor Lamb, But Still a Non Unionist*, *ibid*, 6 August 1889.

businessmen were behind the anti-union agitation, anxious to stop the bridge being built and the town from being united which would hurt Latrobe's interests.¹²⁰ At a public meeting at Torquay in early August a majority voted against union of the two townships.¹²¹

Those in favour of amalgamation sought an amicable compromise, promising that future legislation for the corporation of the towns would include provisions that the interests of both sides of the river be individually preserved. This would be guarded by equal representation on the new town board and an equitable redistribution of rates raised in each locality.¹²² Henry, still sticking to the principle that change should be enacted without coercion, then promised Torquay's residents that the movement towards union lay in their hands whenever they were willing to join with Formby that town would acquiesce.¹²³ This proved satisfactory for Torquay residents, and by early October another public meeting overwhelming ratified a petition desiring union.¹²⁴ A few days later a similar successful meeting was held in Formby¹²⁵ and a deputation went immediately to Hobart to urge legislation before the parliamentary session expired.¹²⁶

The *Devonport Town Board Act* 1889 went through parliament with little opposition and the *Post* noted the news had been received with great satisfaction by the majority of those interested in Devonport.¹²⁷ The Act stipulated that an election for the new Devonport Town Board be held in February 1890, but curiously the electors beforehand

¹²⁰ as reported in *North West Post*, 30 July 1889.

¹²¹ *North West Post*, 8 August 1889.

¹²² *ibid.*, 30 July 1889.

¹²³ *ibid.*, 8 August 1889.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, 8 October 1889.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, 10 October 1889.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 17 October 1889.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, 26 November 1889.

would have to first vote whether they desired amalgamation and then vote for the candidates they desired for the new board.¹²⁸ A public holiday was declared for voting day and campaigning for spots on the board began in earnest in January 1890.¹²⁹ The *Post* threw its weight behind the union in a series of lengthy editorials, asking its readers ‘whether we shall combine to have at the Mersey two comparatively insignificant townships, each struggling for supremacy and each looking with jealousy upon each step in advance taken by its neighbours’, or unite to form a town that would one day become the ‘northern capital’.¹³⁰

There was still some anti-union feeling at Torquay, with a ticket running in the election preferring the *status quo* and police were called to some disturbances on polling day.¹³¹ Eventually, the union was officially sanctioned by 96 to 27 votes at Torquay and unanimously at Formby, and members were selected for the Town Board, the leading candidate being John Henry. Another member of the new board David Cocker saw the day as ‘an important epoch in the history of the Mersey’ believing they had ‘laid the foundation of a great and prosperous city’.¹³²

Road Trusts and Town Boards

Instead of rural municipalities a system of road trusts and town boards developed in the North West. The functions and performance of these bodies to 1906 must be briefly

¹²⁸ see *Devonport Town Board Act* 1889 .

¹²⁹ *North West Post*, 21 January 1890 & 23 January 1890.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, 6 February 1890, see also 11 February 1890.

¹³¹ *ibid.*, 13 February 1890.

¹³² *ibid.*

noted. Road trusts had their origin in the convict period, and were formally created with the *Cross and Bye Road* Acts of 1847 and 1851. These Acts empowered the Lieutenant-Governor to divide Van Diemen's Land into road districts, for the maintenance of cross and bye roads.¹³³ Upon receiving a requisition from 5 landholders and 5 householders in any road district, a meeting would be convened in order to elect trustees who would be able to construct, repair, maintain cross and bye roads in their districts and levy rates and tolls for that purpose.¹³⁴ The *Cross and Bye Road* Acts were consolidated in 1860 and 1870.

The number of road trusts grew rapidly during the colonial period. In 1854 there were 16, 1864 – 37, 1877 – 69, 1887 – 93, and by 1907 the figure had reached 105.¹³⁵ In the mid-1880s the large number of bodies resulted in the *Roads* Act 1884, consolidating the numerous Acts that had arisen in relation to road administration, and a Select Committee investigating the road trust system in 1886.¹³⁶ The Select Committee heard from many government officials, trustees, and members of the public, most with complaints about the system. C. P. Sprent, the deputy Surveyor-General, noted ratepayers often complained of illegalities in trust elections,¹³⁷ while Chief Engineer for Roads William Duffy remarked that often men entered 'the trusts for their own private ends, and when they have got the road they wanted constructed they retired from the trust'.¹³⁸ The proliferation of road trusts had resulted from the constant sub-division of old trusts,

¹³³ Cross roads were Town to Town, Town to Public Bridge, and Town to River or Seashore roads; Bye roads were roads through crown land to private land for cross roads.

¹³⁴ See *Cross and Bye Road* Act 1851.

¹³⁵ Von Stieglitz, *A History of Local Government in Tasmania*, p142.

¹³⁶ 'Road Trust System of the Colony – report of select committee', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1886, paper no.160.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, p1.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, p4.

something Sprent admitted was ‘crippling’ the system as a whole.¹³⁹ For Duffy, subdivision resulted from certain localities in road districts constantly paying rates but never seeing any work done in their areas. The system was characterized by trustees involved in a mad ‘scramble for money’ to be spent ‘among their own particular cliques or members of their family’.¹⁴⁰

Such was the situation in the North West. John McKenna, a Penguin resident who had just joined the Leven Road Trust, admitted that local residents viewed that body with dissatisfaction.¹⁴¹ The process of nomination for the trust was often rigged, the use of open voting exploited by wealthy landholders, rates distributed unfairly, and the supervision of works costing more than the works themselves. He concluded that ‘anything would be better than our present trust’.¹⁴² John Henry gave evidence as well, noting that present districts on the North West were ‘all too small’ and resulted in unsatisfactory roadwork being carried out.¹⁴³

In contrast to the audit office that wanted the trusts abolished to stamp out corruption and fraud,¹⁴⁴ Sprent and Duffy favoured the amalgamation of road trusts to larger entities with minimum revenues of £200 and £500 respectively.¹⁴⁵ The Select Committee sympathized. It noted that ‘many defects’ existed in the road trust system, but that a majority of the witnesses found it favourable.¹⁴⁶ It sought to improve the administration of the trusts, advocating changes in the election process for trustees, and that no further

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, p3.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p4.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, p14.

¹⁴² *ibid.*, p15.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p27.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p4.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p2-4.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p iv.

districts be proclaimed without a revenue of £400 per annum.¹⁴⁷ It also recommended, that with ratepayers consent, amalgamation of small districts occur to ensure minimum revenues of £400.¹⁴⁸ While administrative changes occurred, amalgamation of road trusts were few and far between. The figures for the road trust system between 1886 and 1907 were:

Table 1.1 Road Trust Revenue and Expenditure 1886-1906 (£)

Year	Road Mileage	Receipts Rates, tolls	from gov.	Total	Expenditure Total
1886	4078	16,454	11,569	36,027	36,027
1888	4513	20,323	13,807	41,323	41,323
1890	4978	15,998	13,318	42,040	42,040
1892	5139	19,205	12,201	42,235	42,235
1894	5358	16,684	8,004	25,213	25,152
1896	5400	14,711	3,134	17,969	19,259
1898	5562	16,316	3,175	19,699	19,000
1900	5840	17,207	4,524	21,978	23,025
1902	6539	21,096	7,323	28,886	26,263
1904	6855	24,577	1,234	25,358	30,367
1906	7124	27,721	1,400	30,064	28,566 ¹⁴⁹

These figures show that the road trust system was hit hard by the depression of the 1890s, and never fully recovered. Between 1886 and 1900 despite the increase in road trusts and road mileage, the revenue from road rates remained constant. In 1886 road trusts spent £36,027 on 4078 miles of road, by 1906 they spent £28,566 on 7124 miles of road. Direct government assistance to municipal councils between 1886 and 1906 had also declined. By 1906 the road trust system was struggling to fulfil its obligations.

J. Fincham, Engineer-in-Chief, and G. H. Reilly, the Secretary for Public Works, recognized this in a report presented to parliament in 1905. They noted ‘the expenditure

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p v.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Tasmanian Statistics*, various volumes 1886-1907

of public money on district roads has, for years past, been made without reference to the ability of the local authorities adequately to maintain the work when constructed, and, no doubt, in some cases its presses too heavily upon them'.¹⁵⁰

Town boards arose when, in November 1884, the Minister of Lands in the Adye Douglas ministry Nicholas Brown introduced a bill into parliament enabling newly-created towns to form a board of five members to manage their town affairs. These boards were to carry out sanitary arrangements and 'such business connected with the improvement of streets as could be carried on by municipal councils in municipal districts'.¹⁵¹ Generally members of parliament supported the measure. Some, however, like member for Westbury Thomas Reibey, and Legislative Council member for Longford William Dodery, preferred the extension of the rural municipal system and thought the introduction of town boards might retard that objective.¹⁵² But the bill passed quickly and without much trouble through parliament.

The *Town Boards Act* 1884 was short, containing only 24 clauses. Upon receiving a petition from ten people, a board of three to five persons would be created. This board was empowered to exercise certain sections of the *Police Act* 1865, and other powers 'conferred upon, vested in, or made exercisable by the municipal council of a municipality, in as full and ample manner as if such a board were a municipal council'.¹⁵³ The board was able to raise levies to fulfil its duties.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ 'Engineer-in-Chief and Secretary for Public Works: report for 1904-5', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1905, paper no. 11

p2

¹⁵¹ *Mercury*, 5 November 1884.

¹⁵² *ibid.*, 6 November 1884, 14 November 1884.

¹⁵³ *Town Boards Act* 1884, sec. 7.

¹⁵⁴ Sec. 8.

Glebe was proclaimed a town in June 1885,¹⁵⁵ and a month later formed the first board under the Act.¹⁵⁶ By 1887, boards at Ellesmere and Trevallyn had joined it, and other town boards quickly formed. In May 1888 in the towns of Formby and Ulverstone, in 1889 in Sheffield and Carnarvon, in 1891 in the new town of Devonport, Strahan and Mount Stuart.

The spread of town boards required the consolidation of the existing Act in 1891. The Attorney-General Andrew Inglis Clark informed parliament that, while they were still in their infancy, town boards would be granted additional powers.¹⁵⁷ The bill created much debate, with some members concerned with its impact on country areas. S. J. Sutton, member for South Launceston, warned it was 'a death blow to municipal government in the colony'.¹⁵⁸ The fear was that country towns would sever themselves from rural areas, leaving the latter impoverished and reliant upon the treasury to finance local projects. With country districts already unwilling to burden themselves with municipal government, depriving them of the potential wealth from towns would do little to encourage the extension of municipal government.¹⁵⁹ Two members who welcomed the bill most warmly were from Ulverstone and Devonport, John McCall and John Henry respectively. For these two men the town board system would encourage the growth of towns, whereas in their opinion rural municipalities could, if dominated by rural interests, stunt the development of towns by refusing to pay for certain amenities.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 9 June 1885.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 14 July 1885.

¹⁵⁷ *Mercury*, 29 July 1891.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 2 September 1891.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 29 July 1891, 2 September 1891.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 29 July 1891.

After much haggling in parliament,¹⁶¹ the *Town Boards Act* was passed in late 1891. The most noticeable difference to its predecessor was its size, with the 1891 Act containing 212 clauses. It set out in more depth the powers and functions of the boards. They were given powers to construct wharves and jetties; provide markets, baths and the supply of water; prevent fires; light streets; and plant trees and shrubs.¹⁶² The boards as well could create by-laws over roads, drainage, libraries, bathing, public decency, amusements and nuisances.

The new Act encouraged the formation of more town boards. In 1892 alone boards were created at Bellerive, Dundas, Zeehan, New Town and Queensborough. Others followed at Scottsdale, Beltana and Invermay. The Act was reviewed again in 1896, and further powers to construct sewers, boundary fences and private streets, as well as regulate the alignment of buildings were provided.¹⁶³ Between 1897 and 1904 new town boards at Queenstown, Beaconsfield, Burnie, Gormanston, Moonah, Lindisfame, Stanley, Wellington and Latrobe had been formed. By 1906 there were 23 in existence.

The growth of these boards was remarkable. In 1887 three town boards had an annual value of rateable property of £6625. By 1895, with 16 town boards, this had increased to £79,625. Between 1895 and 1907 the annual figures of town boards statewide was as follows:

Table 1.2: Town Boards Statewide: Receipts and Expenditure 1895-1907 (£)

No. of Bodies	Year	Annual value	Rates Road	Receipts			Expenditure	
				General	from gov.	other	Total	Total
16	1895	79,625	3167	1178	1431	1,493	7,269	6,782
17	1897	81,696	3526	1606	1288	1,309	7,729	8,895

¹⁶¹ See *ibid.*, 3 September 1891, 10 September 1891, 2 October 1891, 10 October 1891.

¹⁶² *Town Boards Act* 1891, sec. 108

¹⁶³ *Town Boards Act* 1894, sec. 177.

19	1899	120,762	4889	2369	9539	6,057	22,854	24,375
20	1901	154,101	6912	9100	9072	3,847	28,931	28,851
22	1903	150,828	7230	3090	4757	10,205	25,282	24,430
23	1905	194,378	9100	4228	5277	15,042	33,647	32,273
23	1907	210,222	9429	7761	7198	19,955	44,343	44,167 ¹⁶⁴

The town boards on the North West were constantly active. The Ulverstone Town Board spent money on improving streets, culverts, drains and footpaths; lighting the streets; planting trees; and building a town hall.¹⁶⁵ The Devonport Town Board likewise worked to improve the local esplanade and water supply; introduced a sanitary scheme and electrical lighting; and made improvements to its town hall.¹⁶⁶ The majority of Ulverstone and Devonport's Town Boards expenditure, however, went towards the maintenance of streets within town boundaries.¹⁶⁷ For the smaller town boards of Sheffield and Latrobe, street maintenance consumed most if not all of their expenditure.¹⁶⁸ From 1900 all town boards along the North West struggled with the increasing cost of day labour required to carry out road maintenance. Greater overheads consequently meant less public works.¹⁶⁹ As well as this, by 1904 10 out of the 23 town boards carried substantial debt to the state government, the worst offenders being Devonport and Burnie.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴ *Tasmanian Statistics*, various volumes.

¹⁶⁵ See abstract of Ulverstone Town Board accounts, *Tasmanian Government Gazette*, 4 February 1890, 30 September 1890, 20 January 1891, 7 March 1893, 25 January 1898, 13 February 1900, 26 February 1901.

¹⁶⁶ See abstract of Devonport Town Board accounts, *ibid.*, 2 February 1892, 14 February 1893, 23 April 1895, 17 April 1900, 12 March 1901, 29 March 1904.

¹⁶⁷ See abstracts of Devonport and Ulverstone Town Board accounts, *ibid.*, 30 June 1891, 8 March 1894, 26 February 1895, 25 February 1896, 14 March 1899.

¹⁶⁸ See abstracts of Latrobe and Sheffield Town Boards accounts, *ibid.*, 9 March 1897, 8 March 1898, 26 February 1901, 18 February 1902, 16 May 1905.

¹⁶⁹ See abstracts of Devonport and Ulverstone Town Boards accounts, *ibid.*, 8 March 1898, 14 March 1899, 29 October 1907.

¹⁷⁰ 'Returns of Loans to Town Boards', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1904, paper no. 58.

Road trusts and town boards by 1906 were in financial trouble, and struggling to adequately carry out their duties. Road trusts had neither the funds nor expertise to maintain the roads properly in their jurisdiction, while town boards were in debt and burdened by road maintenance. The poor financial circumstances, and large number, of local bodies made them natural targets for a government looking to rationalize local government at the turn of the century, the focus of the next chapter.

Conclusion

When more comprehensive municipal structures were attempted on the North West localism had proved, on the one hand, an obstacle that had to be overcome, and, on the other, a clue to what settlements wanted in local institutions. The examples of Devonport and Latrobe demonstrate the desire by settlements to protect and preserve their interests, not to be dominated by other centres, and not to be forced into arrangements against their will. Furthermore, when a union was formed, it had to be with a settlement with which it had a 'community of interest'.

The voluntarist aspect of local government reform as enunciated by John Henry was in the case of the North West a bulwark against major change. As the attempts to form rural municipalities on the coast showed, the settlers felt no need for great amounts of local self-determination, seeing it far better to either ignore local matters requiring such attention or to rely on the central government that had the resources to deal with such matters. But by the turn of the twentieth century such an attitude was under threat. The towns of the North West were growing, placing strains on limited public infrastructure,

and the government increasingly wanted to shed the burden of financing and controlling local works. The poor performance of road trusts and town boards resulted in a debate over local government reform — whether it was needed and the proper manner in which to bring it about.

UTAS

Chapter 2: Forcing Change? The Road to Local Government Reform in 1906

Tasmania was granted responsible self-government in 1856. Shortly after, in 1858, the government passed the *Rural Municipalities Act* creating a permissive system of local government on the island. Though local governance in Tasmania had its roots in convict times¹ and was operating in the cities of Launceston and Hobart,² the *Rural Municipalities Act* was the first tentative step to delegating some responsibility upon local communities around the state for their own affairs. As the member for Franklin John Balfe put it, 'this was the first step for releasing the people from political childhood to political manhood, and transferring to them the benefits of government'.³

The process was to be entirely voluntary, requiring a petition of no less than fifty persons who were proprietors of property in any such town or district and who wanted to be declared a rural municipality. Each municipality was to have a council comprised of six members and power went to those who held considerable property through the scale of voting for councillors. Those who held less than £15 annual value of property were unable to vote, while those who held over £450 were entitled to 10 votes. The councils were granted powers over the local police force, public roads and streets, supply of water, building licenses and dog registrations. They were also authorized to create by-laws for the 'prevention and suppression of nuisances, and for the suppression and

¹ see W. D. Kavanagh, 'The administration of Tasmania: its origins, development and future direction', (University of Tasmania M.Soc.Sc Thesis 1987); K. R. Von Steiglitz, *A History of Local Government in Tasmania: from the earliest settlement of Van Diemen's Land to the present times*, (Hobart 1958).

² see M. Roe, 'The Establishment of Local self-government in Hobart and Launceston, 1845-1858', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings* (THRAPP), vol. 14(1) 1966 pp. 21-45, S. Petrow, 'Painful Birth: Municipal Government in Hobart Town 1845-1857', *THRAPP*, vol. 49, 2002, pp. 203-24.

³ *Hobart Town Courier*, 29 January 1858.

restraint of disorderly houses and houses of ill-fame and repute, gambling, congregation of disorderly persons, offensive trades, cleansing premises, fires, hospitals and asylums'. They were able to levy rates to accomplish these measures.⁴

Between 1860 and 1866 nineteen new rural municipalities were created. The first was the municipality of Glamorgan, followed soon after by the municipality of Spring Bay.⁵ After this activity, the rest of the colony shunned rural municipalities and instead relied upon an ever-expanding *ad-hoc* system of local governance which included road trusts, town-boards, harbour trusts, rabbit boards, marine boards and water trusts among others. As Attorney-General William Propsting admitted in 1906, this perfusion resulted from the tendency that, whenever a new problem had arisen in the growing settlement and prosperity of the colony, a new body was created to deal with it.⁶

This remained the case until the *Local Government Act* was passed by parliament in 1906, giving Tasmania for the first time a comprehensive and universal system of municipal government. The transition from the permissive and *ad-hoc* system of local government to a more comprehensive municipal structure is the focus of this chapter. In particular, whether this reform was forced upon an unwilling population. It is a question that has interested Ralph Chapman and Roger Wettenhall.⁷ The latter noted that a dislike for local taxation coupled with a strong resistance to change had made those in the colony

⁴ see *Rural Municipalities Act* 1858.

⁵ the others were (in order) Clarence, Richmond, Oatlands, Longford, Green Ponds, Sorell, Bothwell, Ross, Fingal, New Norfolk, Hamilton, Brighton, Westbury, Deloraine, Glenorchy, Evandale, Campbell Town.

⁶ *Mercury*, 16 August 1906.

⁷ R. L. Wettenhall, *A Guide to Tasmanian Administration*, (Hobart 1968); R. Chapman, 'Tasmania' in J. Power, R. Wettenhall, and J. Halligan (ed.), *Local Government Systems of Australia*, (Canberra 1981) pp. 705-95

reluctant to change their existing local bodies into more comprehensive municipal structures before 1906.⁸

In a later article, Wettenhall re-evaluated Tasmanian municipal history in light of research he had conducted with others on the history and municipal systems of other states around Australia.⁹ He proposed that the municipal history of Australia fell into roughly two patterns. The first he called constitutionalist, which included a long attachment to property-based voting, rotational elections, chairman chosen by council rather than directly by electors, a relatively narrow range of functions and correspondingly a low rate revenue base, a resistance to state efforts to amalgamate municipalities, strong influence in parliament, and a relatively high degree of formal municipal autonomy.¹⁰ The state interventionist pattern was characterized by municipalities exercising a wide range of functions, having greater financial dependence from central government with less formal autonomy, and more fluidity in respect of boundary adjustments. They were also relatively early to secure full adult franchise and be more likely to elect the chairman directly.¹¹

Using the framework proposed by Reynolds,¹² Wettenhall makes the connection between the nineteen rural municipalities established between 1860 and 1866 and the rural gentry that came to prominence in the colony after self-government in 1856. The rural gentry adopted municipal government enthusiastically because it corresponded with their values concerning the individual and the state, and notions such as liberty and self-

⁸ Wettenhall, *A Guide to Tasmanian Administration*, p313.

⁹ see Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems of Australia*, especially J. Power, R. Wettenhall, and J. Halligan, 'Overview of Local Government in Australia', *ibid.*, pp. 1-122.

¹⁰ R. L. Wettenhall, 'Towards a reinterpretation of Tasmania's local government history', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 67 1981-2 p106.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p107.

¹² H. Reynolds, 'Regionalism in Nineteenth Century Tasmania', *THRAPP*, Vol. 17(1) 1969 pp. 14-28

sufficiency.¹³ Being conservatives, they adopted the constitutionalist model as the most effective way to entrench the power and prestige of local rural families, similar to what was happening at the time in the colonial parliament. Wettenhall suggests that other areas of the island did not embrace municipal institutions because of different economic values and a lack of sympathy towards the constitutionalist rural gentry.¹⁴ Consequently, he saw the reform around 1906 as the attempt by 'those of the old constitutionalist persuasion who wanted tidier administration and fewer demands on the central treasury' extending their model of municipal government over the island.¹⁵ Though Wettenhall makes no mention of it, Chapman saw a fair degree of force involved in the process.¹⁶

This chapter will re-examine the circumstances that eventually led to the passing of the 1906 *Local Government Act*. While broadly subscribing to Wettenhall's thesis, it will build upon certain sections of his argument. Municipal reform during this time was driven by government desire for greater economy and efficiency, especially in times of economic difficulty. Reform was opposed, however, by a combination of ignorance and a general unwillingness to change to new and untested municipal structures. In contrast to the voluntarist sentiment seen in the last chapter, a perception grew that the central government was imposing municipal structures that were not wanted by local communities. In order to pass any bill of reform through parliament the government was obliged to consult more widely with the existing local bodies and population. Once the Act was passed, opposition to the measure remained, but this was dependent upon location and differed according to whether such areas had previously experienced rural

¹³ Wettenhall, 'Tasmania's local government history', p111.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p112.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p114.

¹⁶ R. Chapman, 'Tasmania', in Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan, *Local Government Systems* p718.

municipalities or the *ad-hoc* system of governance. This opposition, found more predominately in areas with the previous *ad-hoc* system, was not hostile to municipal reform *per se* but apprehensive towards the consequences that reform may have. The Act in their opinion, was too drastic,¹⁷ placed upon the new councils too many responsibilities they would be unable to bear,¹⁸ and would create new councils too big, unwieldy, expensive and inefficient.¹⁹ This led those areas to place more emphasis on another criterion of municipal reform than the criteria of economy and efficiency favoured by the government and those areas with previous rural municipal experience. It was then the clash between two criteria of municipal reform, economy and efficiency on the one hand and ensuring a 'community of interest' on the other, that characterized the battle over municipal reform at this time. While anxious to ensure reform, the government favoured the former but made concessions towards the latter. In this sense municipal reform of 1906 was not 'forced' on an unwilling population of Tasmania, but was a compromise between two competing claims.

Local Government Reform 1865 – 1904

In 1865, when the original *Rural Municipalities Act* was reviewed and consolidated after the formation of eighteen rural municipalities, the Attorney-General Robert Miller hoped the rest of the colony would quickly follow their example and a comprehensive system of municipal government would be established.²⁰ However, only one more rural

¹⁷ *North West Post*, 22 June 1907.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 23 July 1907.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 3 July 1907.

²⁰ *Mercury*, 10 August 1865.

municipality at Campbell Town was formed and it was twenty years later, in 1888, that a more serious attempt to encourage municipal councils was made by Andrew Inglis Clark. A bill 'to give all recognised places local government' was put to parliament, though Clark admitted that certain localities in the colony 'appear to be afraid of it, or seemed to be trying to shirk it'.²¹ The local government bill was brought to parliament alongside a measure to centralize the control of police forces in the colony. It was hoped that by relieving local districts of the cost of maintaining police it would encourage country areas to form rural municipalities.²²

Inglis Clark's efforts were thwarted by arguments commonly put forward by parliamentarians to resist changes in the municipal system – it would place upon local bodies too many additional duties that they would be unable to satisfactorily attend to, that local taxation would have to increase to cover costs, that the people themselves had not explicitly expressed a desire for change.²³ The bill was postponed, and, after several stormy public meetings in various rural towns around the colony, a select committee was set up to review municipal districts and their possible alteration. An amended bill was met with a hostile reception again in and outside parliament, with indignant public meetings being held around the colony protesting the bill.²⁴ It was then abandoned.

If this showed a reluctance to embrace municipal reform, why were further schemes continually proposed in the future? For the Tasmanian government the primary

²¹ *Ibid.*, 27 June 1888.

²² S. Petrow, 'Economy, Efficiency, and Impartiality: police centralisation in nineteenth century Tasmania', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, vol. 31 (3) 1998 pp. 256-258. Though Clark was unsuccessful in 1888 to centralize the police force, Petrow notes that the Braddon ministry's success with the *Police Regulation Act* 1898 lowered the cost on municipal councils, thereby paving the way for a more comprehensive municipal system to be introduced statewide, *ibid.*, p259.

²³ *Mercury*, 11 July 1888.

²⁴ see V. G. William, 'Local Government Reform 1906-07: a permanent panacea?', (BA Hons; University of Tasmania 1970) pp. 18-22.

motivation for reform was the benefits it would bring to the treasury. In the years that bills to deal comprehensively with local government reform were put to parliament it dealt also with major tax bills – in 1888 land tax; 1898 income and land tax; 1902 income tax; and 1906 general taxation. At times when the state government was looking to broaden its tax base, it was at the same time, not unreasonably, looking to cut its public expenditure and defraying some state costs onto local residents was an attractive proposal.

As Roe notes, municipal government arose in Launceston and Hobart from the desire of J. E. Eardley-Wilmot to stave off bankruptcy,²⁵ and the time when a comprehensive plan to deal with local government arose again was when another financial crisis threatened Tasmania – the Federation of the Australian colonies. Frederick William Piesse's bill of 1898 arrived in parliament with Federation looming and a considerable anxiety over what its effects would be on state finances, while the bills of 1902 and 1906 came as the consequences of Federation were being acutely felt.

Presenting a revised local government bill to parliament in 1902, the chief secretary George Thomas Collins emphasized this link between reform and reduction in government expenditure, stressing that 'a better system of local government would minimize the expenditure of salaries and give a maximum of the ratepayers money to be expended on useful public works'.²⁶ The bill paved the way for the acceptance of local bodies of increased financial obligation, necessary 'under the existing circumstances of state finance', and could be properly taken up by them. Federation had cost the State some £160,000 a year in lost custom duties and government expenditure had to be

²⁵ Roe, 'self-government in Hobart and Launceston, 1854-1858', p22.

²⁶ *Mercury*, 11 September 1902.

reduced. The government intended to 'transfer the maintenance of all roads, bridges, and jetties to the rural boards – the government for a time contributing a portion of the cost'.²⁷

Reform was in effect forced upon state government, which in turn had to create a system of municipal government that was cost effective and more efficient in providing services than the previous system. Impressing upon the people of Tasmania this need would prove to be a difficult task. A major obstacle to comprehensive reform was the superficial understanding of local governance held by either parliamentarians or the ordinary citizen. In 1891, with the consolidation of the *Towns Board Act*, the *Mercury* for instance could note that 'it seems to us that the municipal system does not work well, because it is not sufficiently understood'.²⁸ This ignorance proved a bulwark to comprehensive reform by making it appear more complex and perhaps more radical than it otherwise was.

An example is another local government bill brought to parliament in 1898. The *Mercury* greeted the bill with a certain pessimism, it being essentially the same as that of Inglis-Clark's ten years previously, and was openly contemptuous of the manner in which government ministers attempted to push the measure through parliament. The bill, it thought, was 'in a state in which it is unfit for parliament to consider it'.²⁹ The Premier Sir Edward Braddon was more optimistic, telling parliament that the bill 'in his mind, would do more to establish good government throughout the colony than any measure they could possibly have'.³⁰

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*, 2 September 1891.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 19 August 1898.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 17 August 1898.

Other members of the Assembly were more skeptical, especially with the proposal to exempt town boards and some rural municipalities, which they felt contradicted the desire for a more uniform system of local government. The Ministry was encouraged to postpone the bill till the next session of parliament to give a parliamentary committee time to scrutinize it and for local bodies to be consulted. The parliamentary committee was formed with members of the House of Assembly, but the government, possibly anticipating trouble steering the bill through the Legislative Council, pushed for a joint committee that was duly formed.³¹ It presented a progress report in early October 1898 that outlined some principles it thought ought to be included in a new scheme of local government. These were roughly:

1. that parliament constitutes certain municipalities in addition to those already constituted;
2. that some of the existing municipalities may be amalgamated;
3. that municipal boundaries be aligned wherever possible with electoral boundaries;
4. that no new municipality be constituted with a less annual rateable value than £10,000;
5. that, in constituting a new municipality or amalgamating existing municipalities, the main consideration in determining an area be the common interests of the people, in so far as they would be conveniently dealt with by a central authority;
6. that town boards to be exempt from the bill.³²

Piesse chaired the select committee and the subsequent bill came to be associated with his name. It was thorough in its duty, examining the municipal systems of Britain, New Zealand, Canada, South Australia, Victoria and Queensland and noting the respective benefits of each. Eventually it concluded that 'the principles finding their fullest embodiment in the Canadian and English local government system...are those to which, if we can assign any source for the development alike of English national character and

³¹ *ibid.*, 18 August 1898.

³² 'Local Government Bill 1898 – progress report of Joint Committee', *Tasmania Journal and Printed Papers of Parliament JPPPTas*, 1898, paper no.72 p3

aptitude for government are due all the best elements of our liberties, and we do well, even if it be but by a machine of government, to foster their growth and give opportunities for their development'.³³ This system of municipal government, with a dual system of county and local rural and urban districts, was to be therefore adapted to Tasmanian conditions. It would, the committee hoped, provide on the one hand a moderate exercise of power by small communities as to their local concerns, and, on the other, a provision 'for including these same communities in the larger municipality which shall have in charge those interests which are common to wide areas'.³⁴

The bill revised and put to parliament in 1900 did not try to augment a new system of local government for Tasmania, but to strip away some of the duplicity of the old system and foster greater co-operation between various local bodies, while still letting them be relatively autonomous.³⁵ But, in repealing large sections of the existing Rural Municipalities, Police, Health and Roads Acts, the bill with 620 clauses was bulky and confusing. At the first sight of the report of the select committee, the *Mercury* deemed it a 'partial failure', noting that existing local bodies had been scarcely consulted.³⁶ The bill arrived in parliament in 1900 with a petition begging that it be postponed or rejected because 'the system of taxation on annual value should not be changed, that the bill was cumbersome and ambiguous, that the borrowing powers it was to grant to the local bodies would prove detrimental to the interests of ratepayers, and that the provisions of the bill were unsuited to a small colony'.³⁷

³³ 'Local Government Bill – report of Joint Committee of Both Houses of Parliament', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1899, paper no. 58, appendix A, pXIX.

³⁴ *ibid.*, piii.

³⁵ Williams, 'Local Government Reform 1906-07', p25.

³⁶ *Mercury*, 25 August 1899.

³⁷ Petition from 67 'Ratepayers of Tasmania', *ibid.*, 8 September 1900.

The Lewis Ministry, having replaced the Braddon government in October 1899, was less than enthused by the bill, especially as many parliamentarians balked at its size and complexity. Coming to the end of a parliamentary session with still much legislation to work through, the second reading of the bill was pre-empted by the Premier Neil Elliot Lewis with the news that it would be held over due to time constraints, admitting that ministers believed that the clauses were not fully understood by the people of the colony.³⁸ The *Mercury* agreed that few understood the bill:

We have tried several times to figure out exactly how affairs will stand under the new system, but have never been able to reach a satisfactory conclusion. That is what is troubling the minds of the local bodies – all of which fight very shy of the new scheme...we have doubts as to whether so complete a scheme as that proposed will be found to be suited to the actual state of the colony.³⁹

The experience of the Piesse bill demonstrated that reform of local government would have to be simplified to guarantee parliamentary approval, that local bodies would have to be more widely consulted to achieve popular support, and that there was a general unwillingness to change to new and untested municipal structures. This was shown when in 1902 a revised local government bill was brought before the Legislative Council. The Chief Secretary, G. T. Collins, remarked that the bill

now before the Council is much smaller in dimensions and not so pretentious as the late honorary member's [Piesse] bill...that there was no doubt that our present system of local government is too diffuse and decentralized and the energies of too many men are required to manage our local affairs...is it necessary for the local government of this little state that we should have so many different bodies requiring so many persons? I think the obvious answer is that it is not.⁴⁰

³⁸ *ibid.*, 22 September 1900.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 25 September 1900.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 11 September 1902.

Councillors were unsympathetic, most wondering why the bill had not been introduced first in the House of Assembly and whether it was necessary. William Perkins, member for Pembroke, saw no 'benefit to be derived from disturbing establishments that had existed for 50 years. The people he represented were satisfied with things as they were and did not want a change'.⁴¹ Collins was asked to postpone the bill and he reluctantly agreed, adding 'it was true that people did not understand the bill, and he was afraid some members of the house were in the same position'.⁴² Reformers then had to embark on a campaign, albeit limited, to gather support from local bodies for comprehensive reform.

This duty fell to John McCall, Chief Secretary of the W. B. Proposing Ministry, and resident of Ulverstone on the North West Coast. In late January 1904 he told all the road trusts, town boards and rural municipalities indicating that the government intended to pass another local government bill during the coming session of parliament and proposed a conference to seek their approval.⁴³ It was held at Hobart in February, comprising of delegates invited by the government. The press was barred from proceedings, McCall justifying this on the rather dubious grounds that it would give greater freedom of debate. He instead supplied journalists with a run-down of the conference at the end of each day.⁴⁴ Before the conference McCall supplied the local bodies with a brief of the bill he had in mind. The most important features were that three commissioners would be appointed to divide the state into not more than 40 districts; that each district would be divided into three wards with 13 councillors, three elected by each ward and four by the

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 12 September 1902.

⁴² *ibid.*, 18 September 1902.

⁴³ *Archives Office of Tasmania*, (AOT), Chief Secretary Department: General correspondence files, Local Bodies file, Colonial Secretary to Town Boards, Municipalities & Road Trusts, 29 January 1904, (Ref: CSD 22 1904 file 93).

⁴⁴ *North West Advocate*, 25 February 1904.

whole municipality; and that local councils would have the powers of the rural municipalities, town boards, main road boards, road trusts, recreation ground trustees and local boards of health.⁴⁵

At the beginning of the event two motions were passed by a sizeable majority. The first affirmed the desirability of parliament passing a local government bill for Tasmania, the second that five commissioners were to be appointed to divide the state into 49 districts with as little disturbance made to the existing boundaries as possible. The conference then went through the various proposals and McCall at the end of the conference concluded that an important step forward had been made.⁴⁶ The *Mercury* was not so sure: 'the meeting does not seem to have been quite agreed as to the need of a new local government law' it noted, still, 'we must consider that many of those who are most experienced in local affairs see the necessity for improvement'.⁴⁷ This is debatable. Out of the 23 town boards invited, 13 turned up and reaction towards the conference was mixed. The Strahan Town Board told McCall it was 'impressed with the importance of the measure your government propose introducing',⁴⁸ but the Ulverstone Town Board did not bother sending a representative thinking it 'unnecessary they should be represented at the conference'.⁴⁹

Town boards were not the only antagonistic local bodies. Road trusts, too, were skeptical of the proceedings, though out of the 102 invited only 20 did not send representatives. The Southport Road Trust wrote that it approved of a bill for the better

⁴⁵ AOT, CSD 22 1904 file 93, Colonial Secretary to Town Boards, Municipalities & Road Trusts 29 January 1904.

⁴⁶ *Mercury*, 20 February 1904.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ AOT, CSD 22 1904 file 93, Strahan Town Board to Colonial Secretary, 4 February 1904.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, Ulverstone Town Board to Colonial Secretary, 18 February 1904.

administration of local government,⁵⁰ and its counterpart at Westbury agreed, adding 'the business upon which our advice is sought is of the greatest importance to the government'.⁵¹ Road trusts of the North West and West were less sure, with the Wilmot Road Trust replying that it was not 'in accord with the conditions of the local government bill and consider if the measure becomes law that all outlying districts will not be justly treated'.⁵² The Waratah Road Trust also wrote 'that any alterations as proposed will not be of any advantage to Waratah owing to its isolated position and consider that the local bodies as at present constituted are conducted very satisfactorily and at a minimum of expense'.⁵³ The 19 existing rural municipalities were the most enthusiastic. Seventeen attended the conference, the Westbury council seeing the deliberations of its members as assisting the government in framing a bill 'likely to be accepted by the people'.⁵⁴ The Longford municipality also sent a lengthy list of suggestions it thought would make the bill more workable.⁵⁵

A second conference in April was quickly organized with McCall having drafted a bill following the principles laid down in the first conference. Several changes were made, notably that all councillors should be elected from different wards and not the whole municipality and that town boards should be included in the Act.⁵⁶ McCall was pleased with the whole endeavour, telling the conference 'the results of their discussion and criticism would enable him to place before parliament a measure which would prove beneficial to the people of the state, this being the object of his labors in drafting the bill

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, Southport Road Trust to Colonial Secretary, 16 February 1904.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, Westbury Road Trust to Colonial Secretary, 15 February 1904.

⁵² *ibid.*, Wilmot Road Trust to Colonial Secretary, 12 February 1904.

⁵³ *ibid.*, Waratah Road Trust to Colonial Secretary, 9 February 1904.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, Westbury municipality to Colonial Secretary, 15 February 1904.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, Longford municipality to Colonial Secretary, 30 January 1904.

⁵⁶ *Mercury*, 20 April 1904.

and soliciting their assistance'.⁵⁷ He took the proceedings of the conference as a direct instruction to parliament that the bill had popular support.⁵⁸

Others disagreed. The representatives from Ulverstone, Latrobe and Burnie reported back to their respective town boards that there was brooding opposition to the measure. The Ulverstone Town Board representative, Joshua Stone, relayed a story that McCall had disallowed a motion early in the conference that no change in local government was needed, saying that it did little to help the measure being brought forward. All representatives from the coast thought town boards should be exempt from the bill.⁵⁹ The Leven Road Trust representative, W. Delaney, also thought 'the conference was very much divided on the question as to the necessity for any great interference with the existing systems for town and rural government'.⁶⁰ Road trusts were the most dissatisfied, with 40 out of 102 invited not sending representatives to the second conference. The number of delegates from town boards and rural municipalities was similar to the first.

So the bodies from the *ad-hoc* system were more dissatisfied with the prospect of reform and the manner in which it was being carried out than the existing rural municipalities. But they could do little until a bill was put before parliament. In July 1904 the government of Propsting collapsed, and was replaced by a new ministry head by John William Evans.

⁵⁷ *North Western Advocate*, 19 April 1904.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 18 April 1904, see also *North West Post*, 7 June 1907.

⁵⁹ *North Western Advocate*, 22 April 1904.

⁶⁰ *North West Post*, 23 April 1904.

The Local Government Act 1906

In July 1906 the Evans government brought the local government bill to parliament, the *Mercury* noting 'the whole thing is so complicated that very few members of the Assembly can make even a pretence of understanding it'.⁶¹ The Minister for Lands, Alexander Hean, introduced the bill to cheers, urging that the measure be regarded as a non-party one and that reform would be needed for between 300 and 400 local bodies filled by over 2000 persons. He noted that 'it all involved a waste of time, energy and money. It had therefore been long considered necessary to pass such a measure, so as to have a more consistent, uniform and economical system of local government throughout the state'.⁶² The main consideration was to secure 'usefulness, unity and simplicity' and the amalgamation of local bodies would mean savings as 'the cost of Federation was making itself felt and economies in public expenditure had become imperative'.⁶³

McCall told parliament the reason for the failure of the measure introduced by Piesse was that it was 'too bulky for the intelligence of the house and could not be grasped by the local bodies by which it was to administered'.⁶⁴ In his opinion the conferences held with the local bodies had rectified this problem, and ensured the bill had popular support. Other members of parliament disagreed. In the House of Assembly John Hope, member for Kentish on the North West, and Christopher O'Reilly, member for Ringarooma in the North East, claimed the measure had no real popular support. O'Reilly declared that 'the objectionable feature of the new bill was that it sought to force upon the people a form of

⁶¹ *Mercury*, 18 July 1906.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

local government which they did not ask for'.⁶⁵ Similar claims were made in the Legislative Council.⁶⁶

The bill provided that a commission of five members would divide the state into no less than thirty-five and not more than fifty districts, with existing boundaries to be adhered to as practically as possible. Each new district was to have a council, and be split into wards of no less than three and no more than five. Voting for councillors would be under the *Rural Voting Act*.⁶⁷ The Labor Party immediately promised support only should there be a more liberal mode of voting than that of the *Rural Voting Act*,⁶⁸ and other parliamentarians such as Thomas Hodgman and Charles MacKenzie, member for Wellington on the North West, showed themselves skeptical.⁶⁹ The *Mercury* warmed to the bill, declaring that 'it would be too much to expect that a local government bill could be introduced which should cover the whole ground and be a perfect measure', hoping that it would work 'well enough in practice to carry on the work of district government without causing any particular dislocation of business'.⁷⁰ Premier Evans was more enthusiastic about the benefits of the measure, hoping that with a larger area of local government the best local minds would be selected to take a more general interest in and comprehensive view of the work.⁷¹

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 16 August 1906.

⁶⁷ under £30 = 1 vote, £30-£79 = 2, £80-£159 = 3, £160-£239 = 4, £240-£359 = 5, £360-£459 = 6, £460 upwards = 7 votes, see *Rural Voting Act* 1884.

⁶⁸ See A. J. C Mayne, "A Most Pernicious Principle": the local government franchise in nineteenth century Sydney', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 27(2) 1981 pp. 16-71 for an example of the debate over the municipal franchise in New South Wales.

⁶⁹ *Mercury*, 18 July 1906.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 19 July 1906.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 19 July 1906.

William notes that the adaptation of the ward system was crucial to the success of the bill.⁷² The ward system was far superior to the shire and borough method advocated by Piesse in balancing competing local demands with the wider good of the municipality. One member, Jonathon Best, thought the ward system would only aggravate the ‘evils arising from local jealousies and prejudice’, but in fact it calmed those small local bodies who feared their needs would be neglected by larger interests.⁷³

Eventually the *Local Government Act* 1906 proclaimed that the state was to be divided into municipalities, with each governed by a council.⁷⁴ The number of councillors was determined by the number of wards in the municipality, with each ward to have three councillors each.⁷⁵ There would be a separate election of councillors for each ward, and a system of rotation was adopted where the longest-serving member out of the ward’s members would be up for election each year.⁷⁶ No persons were able to represent two wards at once.⁷⁷ Every elector who, unless they were disqualified for specific reasons, was a resident or had a place of business within the municipality was eligible to be elected and act as a councillor.⁷⁸ At the election of councillors, every elector obtained a number of votes proportional to the annual value of the property owned or occupied by them within a particular ward by the scale:

Annual Value	Votes
Under £30	1
£30 and under £80	2
£80 and under £160	3

⁷² William, ‘Local Government Reform 1906-07’, p347.

⁷³ *Mercury*, 19 July 1906.

⁷⁴ *Local Government Act* 1906, sec. 27.

⁷⁵ sec. 28 (1).

⁷⁶ sec. 28 (4).

⁷⁷ sec. 55.

⁷⁸ sec. 34.

£160 and under £240	4
£240 and under £360	5
£360 and upward	6 ⁷⁹

An elector who was the owner or occupier of several properties within different wards in the municipality was to have no more than six votes in total.⁸⁰ Every council election was to be held in April of each year⁸¹ with the polls being open most of the day from 8am to 7pm.⁸²

Once fresh councillors had been elected, the first duty of the new council was to elect a warden who would be granted an allowance⁸³ and would chair the council for that year. Ordinary meetings of the council were to be held at least once a month, open to the public where the ordinary business of the council would be transacted. The Act defined this as

1. superintending the conduct of the officers of the council
2. inquiring into the conduct of the contractors or other persons employed by the council to execute any works
3. inquiring into the state and progress of such works
4. generally giving such directions as may be necessary for carrying into effect the purposes of this Act.⁸⁴

Where any business other than ordinary business was to be transacted, a special meeting was to be held. No council business was to proceed without a majority of the councillors being present⁸⁵ and all questions of council business were to be decided by an open vote.⁸⁶

⁷⁹ sec. 45.

⁸⁰ sec. 46.

⁸¹ sec. 54.

⁸² sec. 75.

⁸³ sec. 94.

⁸⁴ sec. 97.

⁸⁵ sec. 99 (3).

⁸⁶ sec. 99 (4).

If a member refused to vote, it would count as a negative, and if there was an equal division of votes upon any question, it would pass in the negative.⁸⁷

To promote more effective administration, councils were able to create standing or special committees comprising of councillors, and delegate to these committees any powers and duty conferred on the council by the Act.⁸⁸ The council could also appoint officers, as many 'as it thinks necessary to assist in the execution of this Act', and pay them as it thought fit.⁸⁹ Other important provisions were that members were not to vote on matters where they had a financial interest,⁹⁰ and that country members could be remunerated for travelling expenses.⁹¹

To demonstrate how comprehensive the reform was, the new councils were granted all the powers and authority previously held by a municipal council of a rural municipality,⁹² the trustees of a road district and main road district,⁹³ a board of every town,⁹⁴ a local authority under the *Public Health Act* 1903, a fruit board under the *Codlin Moth Act* 1888, the trustees of public cemeteries,⁹⁵ the trustees of public recreation grounds,⁹⁶ the trustees of any water district, and a board of advice.⁹⁷ To fulfill these obligations, the councils were enabled to obtain revenue from three sources – rates, government loans, and 'all other moneys which the council may receive under this Act not being the proceeds of a loan'.⁹⁸ These were to be paid into one account called the municipal fund.

⁸⁷ sec. 99 (4).

⁸⁸ sec. 103.

⁸⁹ sec. 119.

⁹⁰ sec. 107.

⁹¹ sec. 111.

⁹² under the *Rural Municipality Act* 1865.

⁹³ under the *Roads Act* 1884.

⁹⁴ under the *Town Boards Act* 1896.

⁹⁵ under the *Cemeteries Act* 1865.

⁹⁶ under the *Public Recreation Grounds Act* 1888.

⁹⁷ under the *Education Act* 1885.

⁹⁸ *Local Government Act* 1906, sec. 155.

Rates came in two kinds: general rates, which must be made and levied equally upon all rateable property within the municipality; and special rates, which may be made and levied either equally upon all rateable property generally or of a specified class within the whole municipality or within a particular part of it.⁹⁹

Councils every year were also obliged to levy a road rate, with at least three-fifths of all money received by the council from each particular ward to be re-spent within its boundaries.¹⁰⁰ A general health rate could also be levied from time to time to fulfil obligations in the *Public Health Act* 1903.¹⁰¹ Special rates could be levied for such matters as sewerage, drainage, supply of gas or electricity, watering roads, managing premises of public recreation, rabbit destruction, constructing abattoirs, and 'constructing, establishing, maintaining or managing any other undertaking or work'.¹⁰² In addition to raising money, councils were also granted power to establish by-laws of a wide ranging amount of areas, including: animals, buildings and structures, business, fires, licenses, markets, pests, public safety and decency, roads and footpaths, trades and calling, traffic, weights and measures, and water and wharves and jetties.¹⁰³

Aftermath of the Act

Reaction to the immediate passing of the Act was, given the anxiety in some quarters about it, strangely muted. Newspapers around the state gave only sporadic coverage of

⁹⁹ sec. 159.

¹⁰⁰ sec. 160.

¹⁰¹ sec. 166.

¹⁰² sec. 167.

¹⁰³ sec. 205.

the deliberations on the bill, with only occasional editorializing on the matter. Very few letters from the public appeared in the newspapers condemning or supporting the measure. The *Examiner* printed one which opined that the bill had 'every appearance of being a measure that will throw the whole state into confusion and disorder...the whole matter wants ventilating by public meeting and through the press so it is not a pill taken without due consideration'.¹⁰⁴ The *Examiner's* editor replied that the 'matter to his knowledge had been in the process of ventilation for fifteen years'.¹⁰⁵ The press and public therefore were not overtly indignant about the bill being passed.

By the time of its implementation on 1 January 1908, some degree of resistance had been aroused. Opposition to the *Local Government Act* 1906 was strongest in those areas that had little previous experience of municipal government, be it of the city or rural kind. Using the reaction of newspapers as an example, the areas around Hobart and Launceston were more welcoming of the Act than those of the North West and West coast. When the bill was put to parliament, the *North West Post* noted that, 'although it is generally admitted the idea of the local government bill is good, there is much apprehension in and around Devonport regarding the manner in which the measure was before parliament will work'.¹⁰⁶ The *Advocate* too concurred that an alteration in local government was 'required and required badly', but wondered whether the bill sought to 'alter the existing order too radically'.¹⁰⁷ The newspapers of Hobart and Launceston in contrast hardly gave acknowledgement that the bill had been passed at all. The *Daily Telegraph* linked the passing of the bill with the closer settlement bill also being debated at the time under the

¹⁰⁴ 'Local Government bill' Charles Coleman, *Examiner*, 30 July 1906.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *North West Post*, 27 July 1906.

¹⁰⁷ *North Western Advocate*, 24 July 1906.

heading 'settlement and progress', seeing them both as important in attracting and maintaining settlers to the state.¹⁰⁸ So early opposition to the bill was not characterized by hostility towards local government reform *per se*, merely the form and consequences upon areas that had little municipal experience.

This apprehension still existed by the beginning of 1908. A failed move was made by the North Esk Road Trust in the middle of 1907 to gather enough support from other local bodies to have the Act suspended for twelve months in order to make some adjustments. Public opinion in the North West at least seemed to have resigned itself to the fact that the Act was coming into operation, though they were still unsure about what the future would hold. The *Post* described the Act as a 'ponderous measure',¹⁰⁹ while the *Advocate* lamented that 'sometimes the penalty we pay for reform seems too excessive for the benefits likely to accrue... It is the price, however, that has to be paid frequently for progress'.¹¹⁰ The *Circular Head Chronicle* noted that 'councillors are wise to proceed cautiously – at least that seems the unanimous opinion among themselves. In the new Act they think they have got hold of something which, if not carefully handled, is likely to go off suddenly and hurt somebody'.¹¹¹ The *Zeehan and Dundas Herald* wrote that 'the Act is in operation, but it will not be long before the public will demand serious amendments in it...a new era of local government will be opened up, concerning which there is great apprehension'.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 20 July 1906.

¹⁰⁹ *North West Post*, 25 February 1908.

¹¹⁰ *North Western Advocate*, 4 January 1908.

¹¹¹ *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 January 1908.

¹¹² *Zeehan and Dundas Herald*, 3 January 1908.

Compare this attitude to those of the newspapers in the cities. The *Daily Telegraph* welcomed the 'fresh system of local government', adding that the provisions in the Act were a '*sine qua non* of excellent councillorship' and that 'the Act is really the constitution of local government and sound general knowledge of it is necessary for effective representation and administration'.¹¹³ It confidently proclaimed that 'there is no visible reason why any municipality should fail to make progress under the new organization'.¹¹⁴ The *Examiner* thought that:

under the new system...there will be greater concentration of effort, and the community of interests in a municipality will be more fully recognized. When interests are split into small sections the outlook of the individual become contracted and cramped...we welcome the larger districts, because they will extend the horizons of the members of the new municipalities, and give greater scope for united effort. These benefits may not be so observable at the outset, but as the new councillors settle down to their work and realize their responsibilities so we may look for great progress.¹¹⁵

The *Mercury* also noted that 'in theory the new scheme should work better than the old, though we have yet to see how it comes out in practice'.¹¹⁶ So there was considerable difference in how those in areas without previous experience in municipal government saw the introduction of reform compared with those more established histories of municipal government.

Why, in the case of the North West, was this so? As was shown in the previous chapter because of the settlement of the region, North West communities were insular and parochial. Subsequently, they looked for local bodies to reflect this parochialism and

¹¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, 7 January 1908.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, 4 January 1908.

¹¹⁵ *Examiner*, 19 December 1907.

¹¹⁶ *Mercury*, 9 December 1907.

defend it. As settlement grew, those on the coast came to be wary of large local bodies, as a correspondent for the *Tasmanian Mail* in 1906 noted:

It is the opinion of some who had watched closely the operations of such bodies that centralization is not always profitable or advantageous to the community, and especially for the newly settled portion of it. Out of sight, out of mind, applies to many road trusts in their dealing with outlying roads and streets, and if the suffering ratepayer does not keep harping on about his disabilities the ruling body too often over looks their necessities, and spends the available rates neared to the centre of the population. The good thus being made better, and the bad allowed to get worse.¹¹⁷

The history of the Road Trusts in the Mersey district bears this out. The deputy surveyor-general C. P. Sprent, giving his opinion of local bodies to a select committee in 1886, remarked that 'their funds are too limited for anything but small repairs, their expenses are out of proportion to their expenditure, and they are apt to degenerate into mere family affairs'.¹¹⁸ Limited funds fostered in those who sat on local boards and trusts a fierce desire to protect immediate interests, creating resentment from those excluded. Consequently, bickering was common within local bodies, and, as settlement expanded, the opportunity was often taken if possible to form a new trust to look after local interests.¹¹⁹ For instance, the Devon Road Trust was established in 1852 and operated until 1864, when it split in two to form the East and West Mersey Roads trusts. Three years later two other areas split and formed their own trusts, the Leven Road Trust and Tarleton Road Trust. In 1871 two other trusts were formed, at Don and Forth, and in 1900 another was formed at Wilmot.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ *Tasmanian Mail*, 28 July 1906.

¹¹⁸ 'Road Trust System of the Colony – report of select committee', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1886, paper no.160, p3.

¹¹⁹ see *Mercury*, 24 January 1907.

¹²⁰ Devon Road Trust 1852-1864, East Mersey Road Trust 1864-1907, West Mersey Road Trust 1864-1889, Tarleton Road Trust 1867-1907, Leven Road Trust 1867-1907, Don Road Trust 1871-1907, Forth Road Trust 1871-1898, Wilmot Road Trust 1900-07.

The reason why local interests were so stoutly guarded arises from the precarious nature of the rural settlements in the region, who were in earnest competition with each other for prosperity and survival. Municipal boundaries became highly symbolic as they could mean the rise and fall of rural communities depending on whether one got a local body sympathetic, hostile or indifferent to local needs. Municipal boundaries came to define and entrench a community's identity. As John Luck, chairman of the Devonport Town Board, put it in 1907 'towns like Devonport, or any other...should, we hold, under any system that we might obtain, preserve their individuality or identity and be subject to the direct control of the electors within same'.¹²¹

Any proposed alteration of boundaries became highly significant. Municipal reform threatened, not only to amalgamate some of the existing *ad-hoc* bodies and alter boundaries, but also potentially retard the progress of the coast. Public works were seen as an central government responsibility, with local bodies competing for a share in what was available and in charge of maintenance and small improvements. If more responsibility for public works fell to the new councils, coastal progress could suffer, as they would struggle to raise the necessary revenue. If the size of the councils were increased to compensate for this, peripheral interests within these municipalities would be ignored, therefore retarding progress in the outlying areas of the coast. So the sympathy towards centralization in the North West and its dependence upon government funds for public works made them feel anxious about reform, particularly what they stood to lose. This explains the North West local bodies arguments against the Act: that the measure was too drastic,¹²² that it placed upon the new councils too many responsibilities they

¹²¹ *North West Post*, 22 June 1907.

¹²² *ibid.*

would be unable to bear,¹²³ and that the new councils would be too big, unwieldy, expensive and inefficient.¹²⁴

Therefore those in the areas that had not established rural municipalities and instead had adopted the *ad-hoc* system of local governance saw the 1906 Act as a threatening change, and, to protect vulnerable local interests, stressed the importance of ‘community of interest’ in governing local affairs. In contrast, those areas with a long and settled history of municipal government placed less emphasis on ‘community of interest’ and more on improving the financial aspect of municipal councils. As we saw in the last chapter, localism prevalent in the North West produced certain requirements that had to be met in municipal reform. Settlements wished to protect their existing interests, not to be dominated by other centres, and not to be forced into arrangements against their will. The result was a preference for small districts and rigorous boundaries that sharply differentiated between ‘interests’, be they between competing centres or a town/country divide. Unlike the *Examiner*, which saw larger districts as creating more harmonious interests for local bodies to pursue, those in the North West saw large districts incorporating different interests as potentially breeding conflict and injustice as various interests fought for power and funds. The north-westerners insisted that municipal boundaries should correspond with similar or like interests.

The government, anxious to ease the burden on its own coffers, was inclined to favour larger units of self-government, which might develop greater economic independence and viability. After all, Hean in introducing the bill had spoke of ‘usefulness, unity, and simplicity’, and placed great emphasis on savings that would come about from reform.

¹²³ *ibid.*, 23 July 1907.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, 3 July 1907.

But in order to get a bill through parliament, particularly the Legislative Council, the government had to acquiesce to those who wanted municipal boundaries to correspond with a 'community of interest'.

Townsley has noted the traditionally conservative nature of the Legislative Council, and the strong ties that have long existed between local bodies and the upper chamber in Tasmania.¹²⁵ These ties are due to the influence that localism has had in shaping the members and views of the Council. Its members often had long reigns in parliament on the back of solid support from small local 'boroughs'.¹²⁶ For instance, William Moore was a member for Russell in the North West for some thirty-two years consecutively (1877-1909), even after he had re-located to live at New Norfolk.¹²⁷ Council members also often sat on the boards of local bodies. The Council as well always claimed that its small single-member electorates meant that it better reflected the 'will of the people' in local areas, and it used its power in the nineteenth century to block government attempts at greater centralization.¹²⁸ The Legislative Council was naturally inclined to support a measure that would protect local autonomy while not radically dismantling a system that it thought had been satisfactory.

Piesse recognized the fears of the *ad-hoc* bodies that larger districts could be potentially inefficient or purposely neglectful in providing adequate services to those in their jurisdiction. He therefore advocated that 'the main consideration in determining an area be the common interest of the people, in so far as they would be conveniently dealt with

¹²⁵ W. A. Townsley, *The Government of Tasmania*, (St. Lucia 1976) p 155.

¹²⁶ *ibid*

¹²⁷ see G. Rootes, 'Regional influences on political perspectives: William Moore and colonial Tasmania, 1871-1909', (University of Tasmania BA Hons thesis 2001).

¹²⁸ W. A. Townsley, 'Submission to the Royal Commission inquiring into the powers and privileges of the two houses of parliament and into deadlocks between them in the state of Tasmania', in *Royal Commission into the Tasmanian Constitution Act 1934*, Transcript of Proceedings, vol. 1 p 191.

by a central authority'. Though Piesse's scheme failed, this idea stuck. This important concession ensured reluctant support from those apprehensive about reform, eventually resulting in the proviso to the commission selected to draw up the new districts 'with as little disturbance made to existing boundaries as possible'. The adoption too of the ward system as a method of electing councillors and distributing municipal funds, thereby hopefully stopping large or particular interests from dominating council politics, was another important concession made. The result was reform that brought a certain measure of economy and efficiency in municipal affairs, but entrenched the notion that there should be a close connection between municipal boundaries and the interests of local communities. But balancing this idea with the need to make the new councils financially viable would create tensions on the North West, and make municipal boundaries a significant issue in the early life of the new municipalities.

Chapter 3: Municipal Councils and community of interest

The previous chapters noted how a traditional apathy towards municipal councils and large local bodies on the North West created an apprehension about municipal reform around the turn of the century. Seeing reform as a significant change, those connected with local government in the region stressed the importance of community of interest in drawing up municipal boundaries. But what is meant by the term community of interest? Fulcher has described the concept as a 'nebulous one', and often used with great flexibility or expediency.¹ However, she sees community of interest in a local government context as having three dimensions:

1. perceptual: where people feel an affinity or compatibility with the area and the people who live there;
2. functional: where a vast majority in a locality participate within a common centre for social, economic and leisure activities.
3. Political: the ability of an elected body to represent and reconcile the conflicts of those within its jurisdiction.²

Fulcher concludes that the more closely a group of people in a locality has one (or preferably all three) of these attributes 'the more confidently they can be said to have a community of interest'.³ In their discussion of the subject Chapman and Wood also suggest that 'a particular group with cultural and vocational similarities living in close proximity in a particular locality' was once considered as having a sufficient community

¹ H. Fulcher, 'The Concept of Community of Interest: a discussion paper which explores the concept of community of interest as it applies to local government boundaries', Discussion paper no. 2 prepared for the South Australian Department of Local Government, 1989 p6.

² *ibid.*, p7.

³ *ibid.*, p8.

of interest in which to form a local government.⁴ They also note that this view emphasizes a 'traditional and historical continuity of interest and area', which, consequently, tends to 'appeal to the past rather than taking into account the future'.⁵

Broadly speaking, the concept of community of interest encapsulates some of the more abstract principles of local government – fostering community, enhancing local democracy, encouraging or preserving independence and self-determination.⁶ Municipal boundaries then drawn up with a concern to ensuring a community of interest may have to take into account several things – natural or geographical boundaries; socio-economic or ethnic differences; or distinct occupational or economic areas. But the other duty of local government is to provide local services and social provisions. In order to do this effectively and efficiently this may require different boundaries to those which would be drawn up under the community of interest principle.

Finding a happy mix between these two criteria was a difficult task for those commissioners whose job it was to establish the boundaries of the new councils in 1907. The existing local bodies on the North West strongly insisted that the new boundaries should correspond with the community of interests existing in the region. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how this community of interest was defined and establish its subsequent consequences for municipal reform.

Between 1907 and 1909 there were so-called 'separation movements' in the Devonport district from residents unhappy with proposed municipal boundaries. Proponents for change argued that the boundaries did not adequately reflect the community of interests

⁴ R. J. K. Chapman and M. Wood. *Australian Local Government: the federal dimension*, (North Sydney 1984) p153.

⁵ *ibid.*, p154.

⁶ see D. M. Hill, *Democratic Theory and Local Government*, (London 1974).

existing in the district. They defined this primarily in a perceptual way, feeling that there existed separate town and country interests that were incompatible. Having these interests together in one municipality would mean political problems hampering the efficiency of municipal business. Therefore they insisted that each interest should be separated and controlled by its own council. Ideally, then, municipal boundaries should coalesce around distinct and separated 'interests' that would be subjected solely to the political control of those most intimately concerned with them.

This view of municipal government fitted well into the localism, particularly the localized view of development, prevalent on the North West Coast. It would preserve the autonomy of settlements that were traditionally reluctant to enter into municipal arrangements for fear of political or fiscal domination or neglect. However one result of the attachment to the principle of community of interest was to encourage parochialism in the outlook of the municipal councils, often leading to poor outcomes in matters of common municipal concern. As an example of this, the second half of this chapter will examine the half-holiday issue on the North West between 1911 and 1914. This arose from the *Shops Closing Act* passed by parliament in 1911 regulating shop trading hours.

As a mark of compensation for such regulation, the government allowed municipalities themselves to decide what day for a allocated half-holiday was best for their local communities. Far from being a purely local matter, the allocation of a half-holiday became a matter of common concern for contiguous municipalities. However, a lack of co-operation in solving the matter resulted, with each council, encouraged by its community, looking to secure what was best for their own municipality first and foremost. This parochialism served to fuse the structures of municipal government onto

the localism existing in the region. This made against municipal reform, as, combined with the conservative nature of the community of interest principle with its fondness of the traditional continuity of 'interest and area', it meant that councils would be skeptical of any proposal to alter municipal boundaries.

Separation and community of interest 1907-1909

The Devonport Town Board viewed with unease the proceedings of the local government bill in 1906, requesting at one stage to the Premier John Evans and Treasurer (and local parliamentary member) D. C. Urquhart that the Town Board be left out of the bill.⁷ Urquhart put its view to parliament but found few sympathetic, and instead told the board to protest to the commission to be established to allocate municipal boundaries. This duly formed in December 1906, comprising surveyor-general Edward Counsel, Arthur Morrisby M.L.C for Gordon, Stafford Bird M.H.A for South Hobart, John Hope M.H.A for Kentish, and Carmichael Lyne, the ex-M.H.A for Ringarooma. Commencing work early in January 1907, the *Mercury* noted their task would not be 'particularly pleasant', as already competition had begun between different centres to grab all the closely-settled and rich land for themselves, while leaving sparsely populated and poor land to the responsibility of others.⁸

This was precisely the situation in Devonport, with the Town Board unwilling to take in country portions seeing them as being a heavy drain on municipal finances, an attitude

⁷ *Archives Office of Tasmania* (AOT), Local Government Commissioners Minutes, Devonport Town Board to Premier 25 July 1906, (Ref: CB 56/2).

⁸ *Mercury*, 12 January 1907.

that greatly displeased the commissioners.⁹ Bird told the Hobart press that ‘some of the town boards are being somewhat exacting, being desirous of fixing boundaries without taking in sparsely populated portions, leaving these localities to look after themselves’.¹⁰ He stressed that the commission would ‘not allow such selfishness to dominate’.¹¹ The Devonport Town Board protested, sending a petition to the commission stating that the boundaries of any new municipality should be the same as the present town boundaries.¹² The commission rejected this, attaching a reasonable portion of country land around the Don district to the Devonport municipality.¹³

The Town Board then sent a largely signed petition to the governor asking for an alteration in the boundaries¹⁴ which was rejected in December 1907 for being invalid.¹⁵ Those in the Don district, particularly around Forth, initially sympathetic to joining Devonport, became aggrieved at the Town Board’s decision to cast them aside and petitioned to form their own municipality with Forth at the centre.¹⁶ This was enthusiastically supported by those in the Devonport council¹⁷ as it helped their renewed quest for separation, and another request for the alteration of boundaries was accepted in August 1908.¹⁸ The Forth’s push for its own municipality was faltering by this time. In order to be viable it required extra territory from lower Wilmot and Kindred that had been included in the Kentish and Leven municipalities respectively. Unwilling to lose such

⁹ *North Western Advocate*, 11, 12, 15, 17 January 1907.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 21 January 1907.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *North West Post* 28, 31 May 1907; AOT, CB 56/2, Devonport Town Board to Board of Commission, 19 July 1907.

¹³ see ‘Local Government Boundaries of districts and wards: Reports of Commission’, *Tasmania: Journal and Printed Papers of Parliament*, JPPP(Tas) 1907, paper no. 24 p3.

¹⁴ *North West Post*, 30 August 1907.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 3 December 1907.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 24 December 1907, 6 January 1908.

¹⁷ *North Western Advocate*, 21 January 1908.

¹⁸ *North West Post*, 10, 18 August 1908.

territory, these councils threw their weight behind counter-petitions in Lower Wilmot and Kindred against the new municipal proposal.¹⁹ Popular support too was never really behind the Forth scheme²⁰ and by December 1908 there had been overtures from others in the Don district at joining Kentish or Leven municipalities.²¹ With a feeling that those municipalities would eagerly grab the Don district if available,²² those in the Devonport council who had become less sure of separation passed a resolution that, in the event of a Forth municipality not being granted, the Don ward should remain with Devonport.²³ This shocked supporters of separation in Devonport and Forth, especially Minister for Lands Alec Hean, who arrived shortly after on the pretence of affixing the boundaries of the new municipalities. It seemed to him as though the Devonport council was sabotaging its own strident separation efforts. The minister met a confused and divided council and postponed any immediate change in the boundaries of the municipality,²⁴ allowing a growing anti-separation movement time to circulate a counter-petition.²⁵ Eventually, with doubts over the validity of the original separation petition, alongside a largely signed counter petition and a vacillating council, the government decided against any changes in boundaries.²⁶ While this left some in Devonport and Forth bitter, the majority in Devonport were happy that they could put the matter, which had made them in the *Post*'s words 'the laughing stock of the country', to rest.²⁷

¹⁹ *North West Post*, 3 September, 7 September, 5 October 1908; *Mercury*, 15 October 1908.

²⁰ *North West Post*, 18 February 1908; *Mercury*, 20 February 1908.

²¹ *North Western Advocate*, 17 October 1908.

²² *Mercury*, 22 October 1908; *North Western Advocate*, 21 October 1908.

²³ *North Western Advocate*, 8 December 1908.

²⁴ *North West Post*, 10 December 1908, 11 December 1908, 14 December 1908.

²⁵ *North Western Advocate*, 1 February 1908.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 26 March 1908, 27 March 1908; *North West Post*, 26 March 1908.

²⁷ *North West Post*, 10 December 1908.

What was the reason behind the separation movement and what the *Mercury* called the ‘Devonport comedy’²⁸ in the vacillating mood of the Devonport council and people that led to its downfall? The answer lies in the way community of interest was perceptually defined in the district, and how this changed due primarily to fiscal pressures. Initially, the Devonport Town Board argued that it should not be part of the *Local Government Act* because Devonport was formed by a special act of parliament that had not been repealed by the new legislation.²⁹ When doubts were raised as to the effectiveness of this argument,³⁰ the Town Board suggested that the old town boundaries be retained for the new Devonport municipality.

Devonport, it argued, had a ‘multitude of affairs of a strictly local interest’ that correspondingly meant that it had no community of interest with country areas concerned only with roads.³¹ The view that there existed separate and distinct ‘town’ and ‘country’ interests was commonly held on the North West. Certainly a majority of the members of the Devonport Town Board in 1907 subscribed to it, believing that any extension of boundaries had to be opposed to protect the identity and vested interests of the town. They feared that the progress of Devonport would be stunted by being unjustly yoked with country people, who would dominate the council and sacrifice town interests for their own concerns. This would only be encouraged if, because of the large amount of country included, the new municipality was to be named Mersey instead of Devonport.³²

²⁸ *Mercury*, 24 March 1909.

²⁹ AOT, CB 56/2, Devonport Town Board to Commissioners 24 May 1907.

³⁰ *North West Post*, 31 May 1907.

³¹ AOT, CB 56/2, Devonport Town Board to Commissioners 24 May 1907.

³² *North West Post*, 12 January 1907.

Country councillors would come to control the committees of public works such as electric lights and sewerage of which they had no knowledge, no particular interest in bringing about, or no inclination to raise their rates to pay for such projects. This injustice would be compounded by the fact that a larger municipality meant area would have votes over population, where a large underdeveloped and thinly populated tract of country would as one ward have equal voting strength with the populous town of Devonport.³³ As Henry Hector McFie, who would become the leading advocate for the retention of town boundaries, angrily told the rest of the board, it meant giving ‘to farms, trees and horses a vote against population – was it fair to give farms and horses a vote in preference to human beings?’³⁴ Big areas encompassing incompatible town and country interests would bring, he predicted, ‘unseemly fights and wrangling’ within the council.³⁵ Another member of the board put it more bluntly, that it was ‘dangerous to give control of Devonport municipal operations to “outsiders”’.³⁶ The petition circulated around Devonport wanting separation signed by 879 ratepayers confirmed this view, that ‘if the boundaries of the town are extended it may result in the town being outvoted by the country and in the stagnation of the progressive and rapidly growing town’.³⁷ Therefore, in order to protect Devonport’s prosperity and identity, municipal boundaries had to correspond with this particular ‘interest’.

A further point to be made here relates to the conflict noted in chapter one, between municipal economy and community of interest in bringing about municipal reform. This

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 15 January 1907.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*, 21 January 1908; see also *Tasmanian Government Gazette*, 1 September 1908.

is not to suggest that the two are mutually exclusive. Where the *ad-hoc* bodies feared that the principle of economy would ride roughshod over the needs of the relatively isolated rural communities in the North West with the establishment of large councils, municipal economy did play an important role in determining a 'community of interest'. The Devonport Town Board argued that Devonport required many local works which had to be controlled by those who bore the responsibility and liability for them. Placing control in country hands was unjust and expecting them to pay for such works unfair. In this case the demands of municipal finance coalesced with the desire to protect the Devonport town's identity and prosperity in one neat boundary around the town. As the East Devonport Methodist minister Reverend R. A. Rodgers dryly noted, Devonport had adopted a policy of 'splendid isolation' in terms of municipal affairs.³⁸

Similarly with the separation movement at Forth. As already mentioned, local residents had taken a keen interest in the boundaries question with the majority early in 1907 wanting to be attached to Devonport.³⁹ Most importantly, the township wanted an end to the Forth river being used as a dividing point for local boundaries, seeing it as being detrimental to the progress of the town which straddled either side of it.⁴⁰ The existing local body in control of the area, the Don Road Trust, was sympathetic to joining Devonport and the commissioners granted their wish. However, the Forth residents were dismayed by the separation movement at Devonport, and became concerned with how it would be dealt with in the new Devonport municipality.

³⁸ *North Western Advocate*, 18 January 1908.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 9 January 1907.

⁴⁰ 'The Unfortunate Position of Forth', John. Geo. Pike, *ibid.*, 10 January 1907.

In late September 1907 the first public meeting was held to protest against the new boundaries and to canvass the idea of a new municipality with Forth as its centre.⁴¹ A separation petition was sent requesting a new municipality consisting of the Don ward, lower Wilmot and Kindred areas. It was necessary because 'there is no community of interest between the Don ward and the town of Devonport', with the country unwilling to manage or contribute to the upkeep of town works.⁴² Like those in Devonport, country residents wanted their interest to be managed by their own people. The leading advocate for Forth separation, the miller C. H. Wellard, told a public meeting that 'the town of Devonport had interests separate from the country, and each part should be allowed to conduct their own affairs'.⁴³ A rural municipality with Forth as its centre would have a community of interest 'such as did not prevail now'.⁴⁴ Those in favour of separation in lower Wilmot and Kindred protested that they had no affinity with either Sheffield or Ulverstone and saw Forth as a more convenient and natural centre.⁴⁵ Like Devonport, the Forth separation movement saw a municipal boundary corresponding with its 'interest' as a means of preserving local identity, and particularly in the case of Forth, re-establishing the former eminent position of the township. A municipality of its own meant regaining its independence and individuality from Devonport and Ulverstone, with the *Post* remarking that the 'settlers and property owners of Forth, Kindred and lower Wilmot districts have slumbered too long, and allowed their interests to be overlooked too often'.⁴⁶ When a Forth municipality was granted in August 1908, the *Post* spoke of the

⁴¹ *North West Post*, 18, 24, 25 September 1907.

⁴² *Tasmanian Government Gazette*, 15 September 1908.

⁴³ *North Western Advocate*, 16 March 1908.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Tasmanian Government Gazette*, 15 September 1908; *North West Post*, 3 September 1908.

⁴⁶ *North West Post*, 30 September 1908.

elation in the township, overshadowed by Devonport, finally 'getting rid of the thralldom under which they have been kept for so many years'.⁴⁷ The granting of a municipality marked a 'new era in the history of that town', whose pioneers had 'little dreamt when carving out their homes out of the dense bush that the dawn of a new century would see local government established in the quiet village and the people allowed to manage their own affairs'.⁴⁸

While this was an important factor in the separation movement, the community of interest between the Don district, Kindred and lower Wilmot was also based around the issue of municipal economy. The separation movement proclaimed the new Forth municipality would be interested only in road works, consequently it would be run cheaper than the other municipalities and along the same lines as the old road trust.⁴⁹ While the farmers of the district used the harbour facilities at Ulverstone and Devonport, they had no inclination to pay for their upkeep, and other town features such as sewerage schemes and electric light were seen as being examples of extravagance.⁵⁰ So the separation movements at Forth and Devonport acknowledged that there were such things as town and country interests, and only those most intimately concerned with such interests were capable of preserving their identity and prosperity. It should be noted how conservative these positions were. After all, Devonport just wanted the Devonport municipality to be like the old Devonport Town Board, and Forth residents wanted their municipality to be like the Don Road Trust. What was most important is how municipal finance often determined the boundaries of interest between communities, because

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 1 August 1908.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *North Western Advocate*, 16 March 1908.

⁵⁰ see *North West Post*, 15 June 1908.

municipal finance led to a re-definition of community of interest that would eventually scupper the separation movement.

One of the first tasks for the new councils in January 1908 was to set the salary of the council clerk and an allowance for the new warden. Compared to the other councils along the coast, the figures set by the Devonport council were unusually high. This caused some initial consternation among the ratepayers, the council not helping things by then setting rates a little higher than had been expected. After its initial petition had been rejected, the Devonport council by the start of 1908 had to rely on a successful outcome of a Forth municipality to guarantee its own separation desires. To help the process along, it decided to publish in March a list of probable council expenses for the next year, in the hope that it would cause a suitable outrage that would increase country ratepayers' desire to leave the 'extravagant' town. It did,⁵¹ but it also caused considerable disquiet among those ratepayers in the town, who figured that, unless expenses were cut, casting off country ratepayers would result in their rates increasing to compensate.⁵² Suddenly the desire to dispense with the Don ward seemed a hasty move.⁵³ The second separation petition was not as enthusiastically supported as the first, ratepayers wanting some guarantees that separation would be followed by economy before signing.⁵⁴ When separation was granted in August, doubts arose on how Devonport would increase its revenue to meet its considerable costs.⁵⁵ This anxiety was increased when it began to look likely that a Forth municipality might not happen and Don ward instead would go

⁵¹ see letter from 'Disgusted Melrose' in *North Western Advocate*, 23 March 1908.

⁵² see letter from 'Ratepayer Devonport' in *ibid.*, 23 March 1908.

⁵³ *Mercury*, 25 March 1908.

⁵⁴ 'Devonport Separation', Straight Out, *North Western Advocate*, 15 May 1908.

⁵⁵ *Mercury*, 12 August 1908.

either to the Leven or Kentish municipalities. This was enough to persuade those who were reluctant separationists in the Devonport council to request that Don ward remain part of Devonport in the event of a Forth municipality failing.⁵⁶

The anti-separation movement which arose from this meeting, eventually securing a 300 signature counter-petition that voided the original petition, argued that the separation movement broke the community of interest in the municipality and was inimical to the commercial interests of the area. Devonport relied on the produce trade from the country and it was in her interest to ensure that the arteries to and from the town were properly maintained.⁵⁷ A Forth municipality only on the Don ward would have much of its revenue taken up with administrative costs, such as a paying a council clerk, leaving little money for their main obligation and lifeblood to its prosperity – roads.⁵⁸ Much better to keep things as they were and pool resources than divide and be both diminished. As John Luck concluded, they had made a ‘great mistake in trying to shut themselves up. The more territory they had the better, the municipality should now settle down and cheerfully accept the boundaries as first allotted as having been framed in the best interests of the town’.⁵⁹

Therefore, the community of interest principle was one strongly adhered to in the Devonport district in drawing up municipal boundaries. There was a particular attachment to the idea that distinctive ‘interests’ existed in local areas, and that municipal boundaries should be created to protect such interests while being governed by those had

⁵⁶ *North Western Advocate*, 8 December 1908.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 14 December 1908; ‘Devonport Boundaries’, *ibid.*, 10 February 1909.

⁵⁸ *Tasmanian Government Gazette*, 3 November 1908.

⁵⁹ *North West Post*, 26 March 1908.

an affinity with it. However, a underlying fiscal dimension often created and sustained the perception that a particular 'interest' existed.

The Half Holiday Issue and Parochialism in the North West

The strong connection to the community of interest principle influenced the behaviour of the new municipal councils. A prevailing feature would be their attachment to independence and ensuring local needs were adequately met. This of course fitted in well with the localism existing in the region which, as already noted, put much emphasis on wanting local interests to be protected and local autonomy ensured. It also fitted in well with the localized view of development, with councils having to be attuned to the needs of those in their jurisdiction if the local district wished to 'progress'. However, the stress put on the desirability of interests being controlled by those directly involved with them, encouraged parochialism from councils in matters of common municipal concern. Parochialism was defined earlier as an 'confinement of one's interest to a narrow sphere' or 'local narrowness of view'.⁶⁰ In the early activity of the municipal councils, it meant ensuring that local needs were fulfilled first and foremost, even to the detriment of neighbours. Such an attitude often led to poor outcomes in municipal affairs.

This is particularly shown when problems arose on the North West that could not be adequately dealt with alone by council's working within their narrow territorial limits. These problems such as financing rail projects, maintaining main roads, and eradicating the rabbit pest (which ravaged the coast during the Great War) were exacerbated rather

⁶⁰ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, 1989 vol. 11 p246.

than solved by the poor relationship councils on the North West had with each other. One such example is the required allocation of an half-holiday in each week throughout Tasmania arising from the *Shops Closing Act* passed by parliament in 1911.

This Act was conceived primarily as a welfare measure in the hope that the regulation of trade by the State would reduce working hours for shop assistants and provide a rest for shopkeepers.⁶¹ It had broad support on both sides of parliament. The anti-socialist Norman Ewing stressed that ‘the primary object of the holiday was to give reasonable opportunities for recreation and pleasure to those employed in shops’.⁶² Labor member Benjamin Watkins concurred with this sentiment when the legislation was reviewed in 1912, remarking that unreasonable hours were ‘only a matter of habit’ that parliament ‘should discourage at every opportunity’.⁶³ Supporters hoped the extra time would be dedicated to either sport or military training, and for this end Saturday was suggested as the most suitable day for a half holiday.

The procession of the bill was dogged by numerous disagreements and worries. Some thought it would be harsh on country towns and farmers if Saturday was adopted, as this day was the only one in which rural residents could go shopping. The temperance movement worried that men would prefer to spend Saturday afternoon in the pub than on the sporting field. Some saw the measure as being too overtly ‘socialistic’. Conservative member Thomas Bakhap protested about ‘the government interference that did not provide sufficiently for the flexibility of our individual life’,⁶⁴ while another conservative Jonathon Whitsitt reminded parliament that ‘as Britishers we prided ourselves on our

⁶¹ *Mercury*, 7 December 1911.

⁶² *ibid.*, 14 October 1911.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 10 October 1912.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 28 October 1911.

liberty, and if a man put his capital into a business he should be allowed to use the whole of his physical and mental focus to make a success of it'.⁶⁵

The major concern was that it would exacerbate rather than diminish tensions between large firms and small shops which had brought the matter to parliament in the first instance. A perception existed that the legislation favoured shop employees and large firms to the detriment of small shop owners and would eventually drive them out of business. A petition signed by 255 shopkeepers of Hobart and its suburbs protested to parliament against the bill for being 'an interference with the liberty of the subject, in restraint of the freedom of trade, ruinous to many of the petitioners, and calculated to drive the trade of the city into the hands of a few wealthy monopolists'.⁶⁶ These shop owners feared that if they lost the flexibility to compete with large firms (usually profiting when they were closed) they would go bankrupt, and that it was unjust that small shops with numerous employees would have to close but family-owned businesses could remain open and be prejudicial to their trade.

In lieu of these concerns, and given the complexities in regulating trade, numerous compromises were made. The most significant was that, in compensation for a half holiday, trading hours on one night would be extended, and that municipal councils in consultation with their communities could assign the best day for closing within their municipality.⁶⁷ This was because it was thought best not to prescribe a uniform solution to a problem that differed according to location and composition of business establishments. The bill provided that each municipal council would be empowered to fix

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 9 October 1912.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 8 December 1911.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 16 December 1911.

a statutory half holiday by special resolution, but if a petition was received by 100 electors, a poll would have to be taken to decide the matter, with only one poll being held each year. Shops then would close on that day at 1pm and not open until 6am the following morning, and every shop in Tasmania would be compelled to close at 6pm on four week days in each week and one day a week at 10pm other than the statutory half holiday. Many shops were exempted – tobacconists, tearooms, restaurants, railway refreshment rooms, licensed hotels, public houses, cooked meat shops, bakers and fruit and vegetable shops.⁶⁸

The bill was passed, albeit rather uneasily. Labor member William Sheridan expressed a common view that ‘the bill presented one of the most difficult problem with which parliament was called upon to deal, because they were confronted with all grades of establishments, from the large department stores employing hundreds of employees right down to the little shop being conducted in a pathetic way by a poor widow. It was impossible in drawing up such a measure to please every member of the community’.⁶⁹ The *Mercury* warned that the legislation promised to create more problems than it would solve.⁷⁰

Before the Act was passed half holidays had been worked out on an informal and *ad hoc* way amongst traders in Devonport and Ulverstone. Usually banks, shops and large firms all closed on whatever day was most convenient for themselves. Though municipal councils had been granted the power to decide which day was best for their communities, it was initially expected on the North West that they would just adopt the day most

⁶⁸ see *Shops Closing Act* 1911.

⁶⁹ *Mercury*, 9 October 1912.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 12 October 1912.

commonly used before as a holiday in their particular locality – for Latrobe, Burnie and Stanley this meant Thursday and for Devonport, Penguin, Wynyard, Ulverstone, Sheffield and Smithton Wednesday. An *Examiner* correspondent noted shortly after the Act came into existence that ‘judging by the limited amount of comment, the *Shops Closing Act* has not caused much inconvenience in these parts, in fact, one hardly hears one adverse word’.⁷¹

This attitude quickly changed, with traders realizing the ramifications of different centres having different half holidays. If shops were closed on Saturday afternoons in Devonport but open in Ulverstone for instance, Devonport residents may decide to do their shopping there to the detriment of Devonport business. Sporting groups also urged that a Saturday half holiday be commonly adopted to encourage participation and attendance at sporting fixtures. Far from being an entirely local matter then, the allocation of a half holiday was a broad intra-regional problem for municipalities and needed a common solution, where either the interests of business or leisure was prioritized and a universal day adopted along the coast that would best suit it.

Instead, co-operation was lacking. A conference was mooted between the Devonport, Leven, Latrobe and Kentish municipalities to discuss the matter in early January 1912, but as no council had decided on what day to adopt (waiting on one of the other councils to make a definite decision first) it was abandoned.⁷² Subsequently, the allocation of the half-holiday was framed in local terms, with distinct movements dueling for what day was best for them in each municipality. Councils dealt with the half-holiday problem on an individual basis often with unsatisfactory results at a local level.

⁷¹ *Examiner*, 16 January 1912.

⁷² *North West Post*, 31 January 1912.

In Ulverstone, the council held a public meeting in early February 1912 to ascertain the community's view on the matter. It had already decided that a poll of ratepayers, at a cost of £30, was too prohibitive for a body with struggling finances, and sought a friendly consensus on the subject. The meeting voted overwhelmingly for Saturday,⁷³ a decision the council disregarded when it met a few days later.⁷⁴ It carried a resolution favouring Wednesday, confirmed without opposition at a special meeting in March.⁷⁵ While some accused the council of favouring the employees of the town, it was more likely that Wednesday was adopted because it had traditionally been the day of the half-holiday.⁷⁶ Saturday advocates were far from pleased, and presented a petition demanding a poll of ratepayers to decide the day. The council, despite the protestations of country members Charles Dunning and Thomas Bingham, who claimed rural residents wanted Wednesday, reversed their previous decision and rescinded their earlier resolution. As the council effectively took no action under the *Shops Closing Act* Saturday became the day of the half-holiday.⁷⁷

The council handled the matter clumsily; perhaps spooked by surrounding councils reverting to Saturday, but most likely the desire not to spend money on a poll forced the council to acquiesce to the demands of the Saturday advocates.⁷⁸ Stung by the council's decision and fearing trade was going to suffer,⁷⁹ Wednesday advocates insisted that proper council procedure be carried out and a poll taken to decide the issue.⁸⁰ They

⁷³ *ibid.*, 9 February 1912.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 12 February 1912.

⁷⁵ *North Western Advocate*, 11 March 1912.

⁷⁶ *Mercury*, 15 February 1912.

⁷⁷ *North West Post*, 13 May 1912; see also *AOT*, Ulverstone Municipal Council: Council Clerks Letter books, notice 14 May 1912 p781 (Ref: MCC 36/2/3 227/55).

⁷⁸ see *AOT*, MCC 36/2/3 227/55, memo to the Premier 15 August 1912, p855.

⁷⁹ *North Western Advocate*, 27 May 1912.

⁸⁰ *Examiner*, 2 July 1912.

obtained a legal opinion on the matter, which determined that the council had acted unlawfully in switching to Saturday, and suddenly the town found some shopkeepers observing Wednesday and some Saturday. Admitting it had been brought 'into ridicule' by its handling on the matter,⁸¹ the council finally set a date for a poll in early September 1912. It was won convincingly by Wednesday supporters 354 votes to 117: country districts registered only five votes in favour of Saturday.⁸²

In Devonport, the process was more chaotic. The local Traders Association had taken a keen interest in the proceedings on the shops closing bill in late 1911, at one stage sending a deputation to visit Wilmot parliamentarians Joseph Lyons and Herbert Hays. It proposed that all shops should be compelled to close in order to be fair on all those involved in the retail trade within the town, and that a universal day for the weekly half holiday should be proclaimed by parliament, lest neighbouring municipalities deliberately set a different half holiday 'to the detriment of Devonport'.⁸³

With councils failing to agree on a common day for the North West, the Traders Association decided upon Wednesday as the most suitable day for a half-holiday, believing that Devonport was the leading centre of the contiguous municipalities and offered the greatest attractions for Saturday night trading.⁸⁴ They sent a petition to the council requesting that day be adopted, and were opposed by a group of produce merchants who favoured Saturday as a half-holiday.⁸⁵ The council settled on Wednesday, upsetting Saturday supporters who requested a poll, which they then won

⁸¹ *North West Post*, 13 May 1912; see also *AOT*, MCC 36/2/3 227/55, notice 14 May 1912 p781.

⁸² *North Western Advocate*, 13 September 1912.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 18 October 1911.

⁸⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 23 January 1912.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 25 January 1912.

222 votes to 118.⁸⁶ Business owners, the majority in favour of Wednesday, were far from pleased. One protested that ‘the course they have adopted is one of interference in the traders affairs, and one which, if not early checked, will lead to disaster, to poverty, and even to anarchy’.⁸⁷ By May opposition to the change was widespread, with businessmen keeping their premises open on Saturday before police stopped the practice continuing.⁸⁸ Supporters for a Wednesday half-holiday appealed to the council and state government in June 1912 to have the day changed with little success.⁸⁹ Eventually, to get its way, Wednesday supporters exploited some ambiguity in the phrasing of the *Shops Closing Act*. The legislation had said that poll could be taken to determine the statutory half-holiday, ‘but only one such poll shall be held in each year’.

Wednesday advocates persuaded the Local Warden Henry McFie in December 1912 to request a legal opinion of what constituted a year in the legislation – was it a municipal year, financial year or calendar year?⁹⁰ The council received legal advice that a year meant one calendar year, and therefore it was at liberty to take a fresh poll in the new year.⁹¹ After seeking further legal opinion the council then decided it was legal to change the half-holiday without taking a poll, and the council at the end of January 1913 by means of a motion did exactly this.⁹² It proved a controversial decision, and Saturday advocates sought their own opinion on whether the council acted appropriately.⁹³ The Traders’ Association, seeking to settle the matter more definitely and quickly, circulated

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 26 April 1912.

⁸⁷ ‘The Saturday Half Holiday’ Fair Play, *ibid.*, 23 May 1912.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 7 June 1912.

⁸⁹ see *North West Post*, 24 July 1912 and *North Western Advocate*, 20 March 1913.

⁹⁰ *North West Post*, 10 December 1912.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 14 January 1913.

⁹² *ibid.*, 29 January 1913.

⁹³ *ibid.*, 18 February 1913.

another petition requesting that a poll be taken to which the council agreed.⁹⁴ Supporters of Wednesday subsequently won this poll 356 votes to 168.⁹⁵

By the outbreak of the Great War both municipalities had settled on a day that seemed popular within their communities. But the process in arriving at this day was disorganized and inefficient. The simplest means of solving the matter would have been for the government to assign a universal day throughout the state, something it was unwilling to do. Another more convenient option would have been for municipalities with a common interest to come together in search of a acceptable day for all. Indeed, initially sporting groups and traders wanted a universal day adopted along the coast. The councils then could have come together, decided on a day that best suited sports, rural shoppers or the produce trade, and then collectively designated this day and demanded that it be given a fair trial before any alteration.

Indeed, something like this happened in 1921. Rather than councils co-operating for the common good, it was the various Traders Associations and sporting bodies that wanted a universal day adopted along the coast. Once they decided upon the most suitable day, Saturday, they mobilized extensively to persuade councils and voters who observed Wednesday to change. They eventually succeeded, despite some intransigence shown by some councils.⁹⁶

The general failure of councils to co-operate in solving this matter was further shown by future amendments to the *Shops Closing Act*. In 1922 a bill was introduced into parliament establishing a universal Saturday half-holiday and abolishing local option in

⁹⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 11 March 1913.

⁹⁵ *North West Post*, 25 April 1913.

⁹⁶ see *North West Advocate*, 12 June 1922 and 13 June 1922.

the matter. This provision was overturned by the chairman's vote in committee, and the bill itself was dropped before its second reading.⁹⁷ However, in 1925 another bill was passed, establishing compulsory Saturday closing around the state from 1pm.⁹⁸ After another failed attempt in 1930,⁹⁹ a bill was passed in 1937 introducing all-day Saturday closing in Hobart and Glenorchy for a trial period initially of six months.¹⁰⁰ An effort to extend this to the whole state failed in 1939.¹⁰¹

The North West municipal councils inability to solve the half-holiday issue, raises the question why, when confronted with a problem that was an intra-regional one, did localism hold sway? The first chapter argued that the settlement of the North West created localism by forging strong local identities based on subtle social differences and, due to the often-fragile nature of settlement, seeing progress in a segmented local context and as a competition between different centres. One consequence of this was that it attuned local residents to the deficiencies in their local geography that impeded progress and made them sensitive to preserve existing economic interests. If then we assume that economic conditions in the North West played an important role in producing localism, it follows that issues of an intra-regional nature if seen primarily in economic terms would exacerbate localism and hinder co-operation between centres

Before the Great War the half-holiday issue was seen primarily in terms of what was best for business. Wednesday advocates instructed Ulverstone residents when choosing a day to consider 'how it affects business, how it affects property, and how it affects the

⁹⁷ *Mercury*, 1 February 1922.

⁹⁸ see *ibid.*, 5, 6, 27, 28, November and 4, 5 December 1925; and *Shops Act* 1925.

⁹⁹ see *ibid.*, 28 November 1930.

¹⁰⁰ see *ibid.*, 24 and 25 November 1937; and *Shops Act* 1937.

¹⁰¹ see *ibid.*, 8 and 9 November 1939.

welfare of your town and its inhabitants'.¹⁰² Devonport traders told their residents to 'vote for the day that will benefit the town, suit the people, encourage business and make Devonport a central business place'.¹⁰³ Produce merchants in opposition to Devonport traders had argued 'that a break in the week was against the best interests of the portion of trade of the municipality which was really the cause of the whole trade and prosperity of the district, viz., the export produce and shipping trade'.¹⁰⁴

The reason for this was that municipalities were particularly anxious not to lose trade to their neighbours. For example, Devonport did not want to lose business to Ulverstone and Latrobe, or Penguin to either Burnie and Ulverstone. This meant they had to choose their day carefully, finding a day that was most suitable for the traders in the town but wary of the fact that other municipalities could deliberately set a different day in an attempt to siphon shoppers from other districts. Devonport traders, who initially advocated a universal day lest other centres around them chose days that proved ultimately to be detrimental to the business of their town, recognized this.¹⁰⁵ Along with the anxiety of preserving trade, was the fear that choosing the wrong day for the half-holiday would bring financial disaster to their towns. For instance Wednesday advocates at Ulverstone warned:

...experience has already proven that Saturday is not a suitable day for closing the shops on the coast...a few months ago the streets on this town were thronged with well dressed people on Saturday evening, and everyone seemed prosperous, and now both on Friday and Saturday night the streets are almost deserted and an air of depression prevails...¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² 'The Half Holiday', Wednesday Advocate, *North West Post*, 12 September 1912.

¹⁰³ 'The Half Holiday Poll', Thos. Whitfield, *ibid.*, 23 April 1912.

¹⁰⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 12 March 1912

¹⁰⁵ *North West Post*, 9 January 1912.

¹⁰⁶ 'The Half Holiday', Wednesday Advocate, *ibid.*, 12 September 1912.

Similarly, after a Saturday half-holiday was proclaimed in Devonport, a shopkeeper there bitterly protested that the change had brought him close to ruin:

...now sir I can take him to the majority of storekeepers here who will prove to him beyond doubt that the Friday late night is a failure and the loss in trade by closing Saturday evening is not made up during the following week by a considerable amount. I have a record of business done during the last 20 years on Saturday nights and even in the times of depression we have never suffered such loss as during the last three late Friday nights.¹⁰⁷

As economic development and progress was locally defined on the North West, seeing the half-holiday issue in terms of business exacerbated parochialism and competition among centres that had traditionally existed in the region. The fear that if the wrong day was chosen it would have dire effects on the town produced a desire to protect or preserve existing interests. This made the municipalities inward looking and therefore prone to the intense politicking by various interest groups each seeking to establish that what was best for them was best for the municipality. The councils too played an important role in entrenching this parochialism.

The connection made between what day was chosen for the half-holiday and what was in the best interest of business and property within the municipality was significant. Initially, both the Devonport and Leven councils seemed reticent to commit themselves to any particular day – preferring to alternate between days that had been chosen by neighbours, that would avoid the expense of taking a poll, or had traditionally been the half holiday. In order to make the council more aware of the issue and to shore up support for their specific day, traders in Devonport in particular stressed the unfortunate impact upon council finances if the wrong day for the half-holiday was chosen.

¹⁰⁷ 'The Half Holiday', Rabbit's Corner, *North Western Advocate*, 21 May 1912.

In June 1912, after growing dissatisfaction with the Act, a petition was circulated around the business community praying that a portion of the *Shops Closing Act* be suspended or amended as urgently as possible making it legal to again observe the Wednesday half-holiday.¹⁰⁵ The petition was sent to the council for its endorsement before being presented to parliament, but it decided 7 votes to 5 that it was not for the council to take sides and the matter was out of its hands.¹⁰⁹

In July, after the government told the traders' association it would not interfere with the operation of the Act, Edgar Keen, the main agitator for the Wednesday advocates, sent a indignant letter to the council asking: 'surely it is possible for your council to take action and assist the shopkeepers of Devonport to open their shops on Saturday afternoon and make Wednesday the recognized half holiday...this terrible act has stopped hundreds of people coming into Devonport with the result that trade is stagnant'.¹¹⁰ The council, which met in early August, was a lot more responsive to the opinion of the shopkeepers than it had been in June. Warden McFie admitted that Saturday closing 'was acting detrimentally to the interests of the town and they were losing a lot of business in consequence'.¹¹¹ W. H. Lewis, a commercial agent, pointed out that if Saturday closing ruined the town, values of business premises would depreciate, and their owners would subsequently ask to reduce their rates. As these rates were a major source of revenue, the council, which before had claimed to be an disinterested party, now realised its own interest in the matter and became sympathetic to the cause of the Wednesday advocates.

¹⁰⁵ *North West Post*, 15 June 1912.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 25 June 1912.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, 13 August 1912.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

So the argument connecting the half-holiday with fortunes of the municipal purse was effective, turning an previously disinterested council into an empathic supporter of the Wednesday cause. But, as was seen with the boundaries question, when it came to anything affecting municipal finance councils suddenly became quite defensive and parochial. Therefore if the allocation of the wrong day in Devonport threatened to curtail business, lower property prices, decrease rates, and be detrimental to municipal finance, it is not surprising that the Devonport council took an active interest in ensuring that was best for Devonport would take precedence over the interest of other centres. Localism in the region was encouraged by the way the half-holiday issue was seen in bringing about the boom or bust of centres, and entrenched by municipal structures aligning themselves with it to preserve their financial interests. This resulted in municipalities becoming quite insular and parochial and discouraging co-operation between them to solve a broad intra-regional problem.

Conclusion: consequences for municipal reform

The alignment of localism and municipal structures would have important consequences for future attempts at municipal reform. At the start of this chapter it was noted how Wood and Chapman suggest that community of interest implied a 'traditional and historical continuity of interest and area' that often appealed to the past than looking towards the future. The implication here is that an attachment to the community of interest principle acts as a conservative rather than progressive force. This can be seen in the Devonport separation example, in that Devonport residents initially wanted their new

municipality to be like their existing town board and Forth residents wanted a new municipality along the lines of their existing road trust. Then, once the Devonport municipality had been established, there was a similar reluctance to change boundaries, and the community of interest principle was re-defined to achieve this. The interesting feature is how municipal finance was invoked against change rather than for it, and how it influenced the creation of 'interests' in the municipality.

The significance of the latter was seen in the half-holiday example. Here the connection between local interest and municipal finance was explicitly played upon, and resulted in the council becoming parochial in its dealings in municipal matters. Therefore, if councils were fused to the localism existing in their region, and told that their duty is to preserve and improve the interest prevailing in their municipality, itself closely intertwined with the financial well-being of the council, then they were naturally going to be wary of proposals that threatened to disrupt their attachment to the continuity of interest and area. Consequently, municipal councils will be skeptical of any moves towards amalgamation. This will become evident in the following chapters.

Chapter 4: Regionalism on the North West

So far we have seen that before the Great War localism was prevalent throughout the North West and that municipal structures often became closely aligned with it. The first chapter showed how certain features of the settlement of the North West from the 1850s produced this localism and how it resulted in settlements wishing to protect their interests, not to be dominated by other centres, and not to be forced into arrangements against their will. While the general settlement of the North West produced apathy towards local institutions, when they were proposed they had to coincide with a 'community of interest' based on this localism. The second chapter demonstrated why this was so. Local bodies that formed in the North West often had limited funds, creating bickering among different interests within them and led to the neglect of certain portions of settlement. The coast then loathed larger districts and preferred smaller areas where the needs of settlers could be adequately met. With the precarious nature of settlement in the region, coupled with progress being locally defined, municipal boundaries became symbolic as they could potentially mean the rise or fall of rural communities. The previous chapter suggested that the way community of interest was defined in the North West suited the localism existing in the region, but resulted in the municipal councils being parochial and resistant to change. It concluded by proposing that the emphasis of 'interest and area' together with localism made amalgamation of municipalities an unfavourable proposition.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the North West after the Great War and the growth of regionalism in the area. It will argue that the declining economic fortunes of

the state saw the existing units on the coast organize on a collective regional basis. Although they developed a more regional outlook, the reasons for doing so remained as parochial as ever. It was hoped that the adoption of regionalism would encourage the idea that the coast was an entity with common interests and objectives. However, the examples of civic and municipal bodies that organized on a regional basis suggest that localism eroded the notion of the coast as some sort of 'organic' whole. This was because benefits achieved by regionalism were often fought over at an intra-regional level, and parochialism often worked to undermine efforts of regional bodies. Localism and parochialism were still prevalent in the North West at this time, and municipal structures came to align themselves with it, often tending to reinforce and perpetuate it. This had consequences for municipal reform, as regionalism's failure to cultivate broader 'community of interest' between municipalities did little to encourage their amalgamation.

The North West and regionalism

Robson called the 1920s in Tasmania 'a dismal decade'.¹ Initially, there was optimism that despite all that the war had brought – death, destruction, social dislocation, revolution – the world was going to be better having fought the 'war to end all wars'. The *Advocate* confidently proclaimed that 'the world today faces vast possibilities of improvement...undoubtedly there is untold suffering...but it is equally certain that.... the golden age lies before and not behind us, despite all that the pessimists may say'.² But

¹ L. L. Robson, *A History of Tasmania*, Volume II, (Melbourne 1991) chp. 22.

² *North Western Advocate*, 5 January 1923.

local pessimists had good reasons to doubt these words. After a brief post-war boom world commodity markets collapsed in the early 1920s, exacting a heavy toll on Tasmania, and plunging her into a major period of economic depression.³ This resulted in an exodus of people from the island and, aided by some poor economic decisions by the government, a considerable and rising state debt. As well as being dismal, it was a decade also of despair, protest and action in trying to turn around the fortunes of an ailing state.⁴

A consequence of the difficult times after the war was that the existing little parochial bodies in the North West realized that greater co-operation was necessary to get their hands on diminishing pickings. This often started with informal conferences between local bodies that eventually resulted in more organized regional structures. But these new regional bodies tended to be inward-looking and parochial, concerned often with securing the best for the North West, and, despite the perilous state of Tasmania as a whole, brawling with the political elites of the cities Launceston and Hobart. A significant portion of such behaviour can be blamed on the tough economic circumstances, which made those in the North West particularly sensitive to protect existing interests. Another important factor, however, is how certain elements of localism between municipal bodies came to be replicated in the North West dealings with its regional rivals, such as jealousy and competition. Harman notes a similar trend in New South Wales during the 1920s, where a regional anti-urban protest movement was inspired by the belief 'that city

³ Robson, *A History of Tasmania*, p390.

⁴ see W. A. Townsley, *Tasmania: from colony to statehood*, (Hobart 1991) Book V.

interests dominated political power and were determined to strangle country development'.⁵

The perception that the North West suffered from the dominance of Launceston and Hobart led to the demand that regional bodies representing the North West should stoutly defend its interests, and aggressively pursue projects primary for the benefit of locals. Does this suggest that localism on the coast gave way to a wider regionalism? So far the term region has been used to describe the North West as a broad geographical entity with differences to other parts of the state.⁶ One scholar has written that 'regions are subjective artistic devices, and they must be shaped to fit the hand of the individual user. There can be no standard definition of a region and there can be no universal rules for recognizing, determining and describing regions'.⁷ Be this as it may, it perhaps is useful to define regions in terms of a physical/functional dualism. Physical regions refer to territorial, military and economic spaces, which, to a certain extent, can be imposed on people regardless of whether they desire it or not. Functional regions are defined by non-territorial factors, usually a distinctive or particular culture, and to a certain extent 'imagined' by those who live within them.⁸

Which category does the North West fit into? Despite some differences, it is a stretch to say that the people of the North West were so different from the rest of the population in Tasmania that they constituted some sort of distinctive 'cultural entity'. Carving out their settlements in their local geography did create different priorities to those elsewhere on

⁵ G. Harman, 'New State Agitation in Northern New South Wales 1920-1929', *Journal of Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 63(1) 1977 p26.

⁶ see E. A. Winter, and D. D. Harris, *Tasmania: regions and themes*, (Melbourne 1969) chp. 5.

⁷ J. F. Hart, as quoted in M. B. Pudup, 'Arguments with Regional Geography', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 12 (3) 1998 p372.

⁸ see for instance, R. Vayrynen, 'Regionalism: old and new', *International Studies Review*, vol. 5(1) 2003 p27.

the island, but fundamentally they spoke the same language, partook in the same religions, played the same sports, and toasted the same king as most other residents in the state. In defining the North West as a region one therefore must only emphasize the physical space inhabited by those in the corner of the island.

This is important in assessing the nature of regionalism in the North West. Like localism, a precise definition of the term is difficult to pin down. A distinction can be made between regionalism conveniently adopted as a political mechanism for extracting funds and influence from a central government, and regionalism as the advocacy and advancement of the interests, functions and competence of a distinctive part of a state against the same aspects of a wider whole.⁹ If we accept that the North West is defined as a region in a physical and not functional sense, then the former definition of regionalism applies. The reason for it not being the latter is that the coast was not a distinctive cultural entity, which needed to stress its special rights and privileges against the wider whole, and that localism often eroded the imagining of the coast as some sort of 'organic' whole. The benefits achieved from regional bodies were often fought over at an intra-regional level, and, localism also served to undermine efforts being made by regional bodies. Had the North West seen itself as a broader, more harmonious whole, it might be argued that it would not matter where the benefits of regionalism ended up, so long as they were somewhere in the North West than elsewhere in the state. The particular attachment to locality, and how localism sometimes worked against regional initiatives, suggest that the regionalism the coast adopted from the 1920s was a political

⁹ see R. Preston, 'Regionalism and National Identity: Canada', in R. Berry, and J. Acheson, (ed.), *Regionalism and National Identity: multi-disciplinary essays on Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, (Christchurch 1985) p3.

mechanism adopted to obtain resources and preserve existing interests for those who inhabited the physical space of the North West coast. To explore this further the rest of the chapter will examine the examples of the North West tourist industry and the municipal league that arose after the war.

North West Tourism

At the end of 1918, following a remarkable period of growth and progress, a correspondent for the *Examiner* newspaper encouraged readers who wanted 'to feast their eyes on Nature at its best to take a trip through the Leven municipality... the beautiful valleys and mountains, the rushing gorges, and the fertile plains are all a mass of colours and live chocolates and greens predominate the beautiful rays of the sun light up the whole, making a picture that no brush can express on canvas'.¹⁰ Who would not want to visit such a place? As early as 1913 prominent journalist A. J. Wood noted that twenty five years previously Ulverstone had been unknown to the tourist trade but 'today its fame has spread far and wide in Australia...because of the fine solid attractions it is able to offer the visitor and tourist'.¹¹ This included the town's beautiful beaches, fishing spots, scenic drives, caves and picnic areas. Wood, however, added that 'North West Coasters are not yet alive to the beauty of their own fertile heritage that, with whole hearted co-operation between town and town, may easily be made the Riviera of Australia, attracting thousands of visitors and tens of thousands of pounds annually'.¹²

¹⁰ *Launceston Examiner*, 26 December 1918.

¹¹ *North West Post*, 10 September 1913.

¹² *ibid.*

The tourist trade on the North West at this time was, as Wood noted, 'localized' in that each town tended to have its own tourist association working solely to promote their own centre. Often tourism was considered an adjunct to 'progress', and most tourist associations included progress in their titles and sought to work with municipal councils and other local bodies towards the betterment of their towns. For instance, in February 1904, moves were made at Ulverstone to revive the previously existing Improvement Association in the town.¹³ A requisition for a public meeting was presented to the local Town Board with the words that 'the initiation of this movement is a step in the right direction, as there is no doubt when formed the association will prove a powerful auxiliary to the Town Board in making Ulverstone more inviting to visitors'.¹⁴ The numbers at the meeting were small, but they met to form a progress association 'the object of which being to conserve for the use of the people and the pleasure of tourists the many beauty spots around Ulverstone'.¹⁵ They believed that Ulverstone would one day reach prominence as a summer resort. An association was subsequently formed with Dr. John McCall becoming president¹⁶ and was met with apathy from the local populace.¹⁷

A similar situation existed in Devonport where in May 1904 a meeting was held to disband the then existing Devonport Improvement and Progress Association. For member Charles Ramsay 'their receipts had been so disappointingly small that the most they could do would be to discuss the ideals which would have to work out at their own salvation'.¹⁸ A blunt resolution was moved and carried, that 'due to apathy shown by

¹³ *North Western Advocate*, 13 February 1904.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 17 February 1904.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 22 February 1904.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 7 May 1904.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 5 May 1904.

landholders and others interested the association be wound up'.¹⁹ The *Advocate* was saddened by its demise, with 'the work of improvement and beautification all too much neglected in every coastal centre'.²⁰ By 1907 a tourist association, called the North West Tourist Association but based primarily around Devonport, was the only prominent civic body in the town, and even then the *North West Post* noted it was in a 'comatose condition'.²¹ 'If Devonport is to be popularized as a tourist resort', it continued, 'more activity must be displayed...and all the members must do their share of the work and not leave the responsibility, as they usually do, to one or two enthusiasts'.²² This situation lasted until the end of the war.

Morris has written an interesting account of the tourism industry in Tasmania to 1905.²³ She notes that tourism in the state grew with the expansion of shipping and rail, making travelling quicker and more comfortable in the late nineteenth century.²⁴ Tourists were predominately from the upper and middle classes and came for 'the season' that ran from November to February.²⁵ Morris argues that prior to 1890 the tourist trade in Tasmania grew despite any real attention being paid to promotion and improvement. However, the 1890s saw a decline in numbers of tourists arriving in the island, and this sparked a new attitude towards the trade. As she concludes, 'Tasmanians were forced to realize the budgeted importance of the revenue derived from the tourists each season. Consequently tourist association's were formed to advertise Tasmania and to at least maintain if not

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *North West Post*, 29 November 1907.

²² *ibid.*

²³ C. A. Morris, 'In Pursuit of Travelling Man: a study of Tasmanian tourism to 1905', (BA. Hons University of Tasmania 1975).

²⁴ *ibid.*, p iv.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p vi.

expand the Tasmanian tourist trade'.²⁶ With this link made between tourism and financial prosperity, it is not surprising that the tourist associations came to be made up of commercial middle class men and those with a direct interest in attracting as many tourists as possible into their towns. As the *Advocate* pointed out: 'no money circulates so widely as tourist money...visitors descending on our shore like hordes of locusts are the best of all markets...a good season means prosperity all round, and more employment'.²⁷

Amongst those who in 1904 sought a new tourism and progress body in Ulverstone were six storekeepers, a saddler, a jeweler, a photographer, a merchant, and a solicitor. Throughout the period to 1939 middle class men dominated the Ulverstone Tourist Association (UTA) with only the occasional farmer or tradesman. The most outstanding participant in the UTA was Ernest Frith, a storekeeper, who was a founder of the organisation and worked tirelessly for years in its service. Other prominent members were R. L. Parsons, a coach-builder, R. W. McGowan, proprietor of the Furners Hotel; G. P. Taylor, the local photographer; and local journalist R. P. House, and solicitor A. C. Solomon. Councillors too were part of the association, in particular A. S. Lakin who was an enthusiastic advocate for its work within the council for many years, and Edward Hobbs and H. A. Nichols.²⁸

In Devonport the same pattern applied. The more prominent early members of the tourist association in that town included A. W. Marshall a storekeeper, S. P. Griffiths a stable proprietor; John Luck a hotelkeeper; Charles Ramsay a draper; journalists E. H.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p viii.

²⁷ *North Western Advocate*, 2 January 1936.

²⁸ see *ibid.*, 11 February 1907, 8 October 1908, 29 September 1926.

Richmond and John Donohue; a local clerk B. C. Greene; and A. J. Atkinson, cycle manufacturer. Later the more active members would be W. C. Hart, a garage proprietor; A. J. Stokes, a local journalist; William Jeffrey a builder; and E. H. Betts an accountant.²⁹

The tourist trade to the Great War came to be characterized by several features – it was localized, it was associated with progress, it was the pursuit of middle class commercial men, and was met often with apathy from local residents. The emphasis on the relationship between tourism and localized ‘progress’, and the large stake held in this by local commercial men, beget localism and competition in the tourism industry at this time. This had certain benefits. For instance, in part it drove improvements in infrastructure such as sewerage, water, electricity, roads, rail and buildings that were important in attracting visitors and staying ahead of competitors. Essentially tourist towns have to be attractive to visiting strangers and this then invariably resulted in them becoming pleasant places for local residents.

But the localized and competitive aspect of the industry had its disadvantages. The apathy that greeted the local associations from their communities meant limited resources, especially money, but also manpower and the support from municipal councils and governments, who provided considerably less financial assistance than was required to ensure substantial work was done in the municipality. While this limited the work that could be done by the associations, parochialism exacerbated their problems. For instance, the most common means of promotion was by the brochure. Each association produced its own guides, maps and brochures, or attempted to raise the necessary cash to buy space in the official tourist book.³⁰ The result was usually poor, with supply to

²⁹ see *ibid.*, 19 September 1908, 4 November 1911, 3 March 1917, 31 August 1927.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 3 July 1908.

bureaus unreliable and tourists disconcerted when receiving an armful of different books for places in close proximity.³¹

The inefficiency of these local bodies each doing their own thing was soon recognized. After considerable debate a state tourist department was established under the commission of railways in 1914. A director was appointed to formulate statewide policies aimed at distributing tourists over a broader geographical area.³² As Harris noted, tourism in Tasmania went from a trade to an industry, with a more centralized organization and outlook.³³ By 1922 tourism in the hands of the state was booming.³⁴ But economic pressures reduced the government's direct role, and increasingly throughout the 1920s and 1930s the tourism industry welcomed de-centralization and particularly regionalism. One reason for this was parochialism. Prior to 1912 Hobart took the bulk of advertising funds and the island's tourist traffic.³⁵ The move to a more centralized system naturally created the expectation that other areas of the state would be given due consideration, and reap greater benefits from the tourist trade. This was most heavily contested in Launceston, and a fierce stoush resulted between North and South over control and direction of the industry.³⁶ Both tried to enlist the sympathy and support of the North West, but that region had its own problems with the tourist industry it was trying to redress.

³¹ 'The Tourist Trade' Geo. W. Smith, Commissioner Tasmanian Railways, *North West Post*, 16 February 1914.

³² S. Harris, 'Selling Tasmania: boosterism and the creation of the tourist state 1912-1928', (PhD University of Tasmania 1993), p7.

³³ *ibid.*, pii.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p8.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p15.

³⁶ see *ibid.*, pp. 53-66.

A major grievance was the lack of advertising and information on North Western towns in official tourist guides.³⁷ The *Advocate* lamented that 'statements are repeatedly made by visitors that they hear little of the charms of the West and North West in comparison to the news obtainable regarding the attractions of Hobart and Launceston'.³⁸ It urged local tourist associations from Deloraine to Circular Head to unite 'to so advertise and popularize this part of the state with mainlanders that it would have a fair chance of coming unto its own as far as the tourist trade is concerned'.³⁹ By 1927 a member of the Port Sorell Improvement Association suggested that such a body was needed to combat 'the forces against the North West Coast'.⁴⁰ Who these forces were was never specifically defined, but often implied Northern and Southern interests, shipping companies, bureaucrats in Hobart, and striking union members that disrupted the shipping trade across Bass Strait. In July a conference was held between all tourist bodies from Deloraine to Wynyard, in order to create a body 'to control the tourist business generally in the interests of the North West Coast'.⁴¹ A tourist league was subsequently formed with each association on the coast to be included as a member, and a small executive appointed to better co-ordinate the tourist trade in the region.

The unabashed aim of the North West and West Tourist League was to secure for the North West its fair share of the tourist's money. As one member put it, 'on the mainland a majority thought of Tasmania in terms of Hobart and Launceston, and it was necessary that the claims of the North West be pushed. Surely no part had better claims than this

³⁷ see *North Western Advocate*, 6 February 1923, 26 November 1926.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 22 January 1926.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 24 May 1927.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 20 July 1927.

part of the state'.⁴² The *Advocate* agreed, proudly stating 'no unbiased person who has travelled the state will deny that the country districts can offer attractions for the tourist unsurpassed by those of either Hobart or Launceston. But until such advantages are made more widely known, and until facilities are provided to carry visitors to the smaller centres in comfort, the latter will not receive the benefit which their natural facilities entitle them to'.⁴³ Greater regional co-operation and asserting the particular needs of the North West against other areas of the state was considered the best means of achieving this. As a member from Burnie, Major C. D. Horne, put it 'the tourist traffic was now a matter of cold, hard business and the coast would have to be united in all its power to obtain the representation to which it was entitled'.⁴⁴

The league's performance did not match these hopes. Its most significant achievement was joining with the North West Municipal League to ensure a better shipping service to the North West. Otherwise it was hampered by a lack of funds, infrequent meetings, and a lack of co-operation among its members. By the mid-1930s the *Advocate* lamented:

...it should be plain to all concerned that without unity little will be achieved...the position at present is that we have in the state two cities using all the influence which they possess to secure the great bulk of the tourist traffic. It is futile for any of our towns to set singly about the task of combating that influence...there must, however, be united and unselfish effort, and no attempt on the part of any one town to gain at the expense of another...the fact that each locally has its attraction of offer the tourist, means of communication between them are good, and naturally the majority of visitors, after seeing one town, would want to visit others. If we can concentrate upon getting tourists to the coast we need not bother as to which of the various centres will derive the greatest benefit...it must be apparent that something more than has been attempted in the past.⁴⁵

⁴² *ibid.*, 14 February 1930.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 8 February 1929.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 16 February 1934.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 6 March 1934.

The coast did not see itself as a common entity, and localism and parochialism combined to make competition and jealousy rife between centres undermining greater regional initiatives. In 1934 a Launceston tourist brochure outlined numerous motor trips from Deloraine to Burnie, mentioning the pleasures in and around Latrobe, Ulverstone and Burnie, but omitting Devonport. The Devonport Tourist Association saw it as a deliberate slur and was furious, demanding an apology and an alteration of the brochure.⁴⁶ In March that year the tourist league met and complained that the government tourist bureau was giving the coast scant recognition, alleging that a recent booklet of some 2000 words contained only three lines about Burnie and nothing on Devonport and Ulverstone. Having passed a motion protesting the lack of advertising for the coast in government publications, the league toyed with producing a guide of its own. However, the method of doing so created disagreements. It was proposed that space in the booklet be given pro rata to the amount contributed. This was unacceptable to the smaller tourist bodies, who warned of the booklet being dominated by Burnie, Devonport and Latrobe, and defeating the purpose of achieving greater exposure for the whole coast. A more equitable, but overall less financial, scheme was eventually settled upon.⁴⁷ The Devonport council tended to support its local tourist association financially more than the league⁴⁸ though when it came to donations to the printing of a guide by the regional body it was sure to match the sums of other centres.⁴⁹

Little therefore had changed on the coast. In a visit to the region in the mid-1930s Morris Miller, the vice-chancellor of the University of Tasmania, observed that the

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 2 March 1934.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 9 March 1934.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 27 June 1934.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 26 August 1935.

'tourist cannot help being confronted with the clashing of so-called sectional interests'.⁵⁰ Instead of being detrimental to the coast's interests, for Miller localism was a positive outcome, a 'testimony to its growth and advancement'.⁵¹ It was for the greater good that each North West town was 'endeavoring to exploit the geographical disadvantages of its neighbours, and demand loyalty from its hinterland'.⁵² Greater regional organization did little then to undermine what Miller called 'localized sentiments' that had long dominated coastal life. Emphasis was still placed on the benefits of small local units going it alone in competition with their neighbours. Regionalism was adopted to aid this process, used as political leverage to extract funds and influence from shrinking sources during tough economic times.

North West Municipal League

Civic bodies were not the only ones to recognize the benefits of regionally organizing after the war. The early 1920s saw the establishment of a North West municipal league comprising representatives from all councils in the region. The reasons for forming the league stemmed from the problems arising from the existing body dealing with municipal issues. Soon after the new municipal system had arisen in 1908 it was suggested that a statewide Municipal Association should be formed annually to discuss municipal problems as they arose. The objects of the association were various – to watch over and protect the interests, rights and privileges of municipal corporations; to take action in

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 15 January 1936.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

relation to any subject affecting municipal bodies or legislation; and to promote the efficient carrying out of the *Local Government Act*.⁵³

The *Advocate* welcomed the move, predicting the association would become 'a power in the land and the deliberations of the delegates would command attention and respect'.⁵⁴ Having noted that previously applications for government assistance put forward by isolated councils had failed because of insufficient parliamentary support,⁵⁵ the association would epitomize the notion that 'union is strength' and as such the government 'could not ignore requests made by such a united authority'.⁵⁶ The Leven council, particularly its member Thomas Bingham, was instrumental in organizing the conference that eventually saw the formation of the association in 1911.⁵⁷ The *Advocate* proclaimed it 'marks an epoch in the management of our local affairs which must tend to increase the importance and efficiency of municipal institutions'.⁵⁸

But the association had a checkered early history. Meeting only once a year over a few days with a large number of delegates, the ability of councils to place their concerns on the agenda paper resulted in the conferences becoming unwieldy. Much time was taken up dealing with matters that were either trivial or superfluous. Along with councils often disregarding motions passed at conferences, this tended to undermine some of the credibility and effectiveness of the association. This came to be reflected in the government's early relationship with it. Despite its warm attitude at the conferences, the

⁵³ *ibid*, 8 March 1909, 21 June 1909, 11 August 1909.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 16 September 1911.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 8 March 1909.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 16 September 1911.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, 12 September 1911, 16 October 1911, 19 October 1911, 30 November 1911; see also *Archives Office of Tasmania*, (AOT), Municipal Association of Tasmania: General Correspondence of the Secretary, memo from Leven Council, 20 October 1911, (Ref: CB 52/1).

⁵⁸ *North Western Advocate*, 28 November 1911.

association constantly complained that the government was ignoring recommendations passed by its members. By 1918 one moaned that the 'association conferences had been going on for seven years with not too much to show for it...very few of the motions passed from time to time had been given effect to by parliament'.⁵⁹ The government for its part usually replied that their recommendations were being perused by the Attorney-General, or that their concerns had been 'more or less' met by amendments the government had already drawn up.

By the start of the 1920s there was a growing dissatisfaction with how the association was run, with many councils on the coast thinking it too unwieldy and a waste of money.⁶⁰ Numerous proposals to reform the association were discussed, from fewer delegates to triennial conferences. The most seriously considered was a proposal to form group associations around the state based on councils that fell into certain regions. These group associations would discuss and deal with municipal matters at a regional level, with the municipal association to deal with the most important and statewide municipal issues. A motion for the proposal was eventually rejected in 1922.⁶¹ The defeat of this proposal only encouraged those already dissatisfied with the municipal association on the coast to form their own regional body outside the municipal association structure.

There were already precedents around the state. The West Coast had formed its own Municipal Association soon after the new councils had come into existence in 1908.⁶² In 1915 the Huon, Port Cygnet and Esperance councils held a meeting to form an

⁵⁹ AOT, Municipal Association of Tasmania: Printed Copies of Minutes, 1918 Municipal Association of Tasmania conference minutes, (Ref: CB 52/6).

⁶⁰ *North Western Advocate*, 21 May 1923.

⁶¹ AOT, CB 52/6, 1922 Municipal Association of Tasmania conference minutes.

⁶² see AOT, West Coast Municipal Association Minutes, (Ref: NS 1062/2).

association to 'deal with all matters of interest to the three districts'.⁶³ The subsequent chairman of the association D. E. Ryan admitted that misunderstandings upon questions of important public works had arisen, 'which should never have cropped up, and instead of fighting each other they should have been working together'.⁶⁴ Though it initially planned to meet every three months, the Huon Municipal Association met but sporadically between 1915 and 1939.⁶⁵ It did involve itself in important work however, including Port Cygnet harbor improvements, dredging the Huon river, urging a railway from Hobart to Huonville,⁶⁶ improving Shipwright's Point wharf,⁶⁷ and advocating for a High School in the Huon district.⁶⁸ Following on from the North West, a North East Municipal League was formed in 1925, the object of which was to 'benefit the whole of the North East, and not just any one particular part'.⁶⁹ It was composed of the George Town, Lilydale, Scottsdale, Ringarooma and Portland councils.⁷⁰ It also involved itself in a variety of matters, particularly roads,⁷¹ Hydro-electricity,⁷² and the rabbit pest.⁷³

In June 1921 the Table Cape council passed a motion proposing the establishment of a North West Municipal Association, with one member D. T. Jones opining that he had 'little time for the larger municipal association as that appeared unable to accomplish

⁶³ *The Huon Times*, 24 February 1915.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ see AOT, Huon Municipal Association Minutes 1915-1953, (Ref: NS 1062/1).

⁶⁶ *The Huon Times*, 2 June 1915.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 30 May 1916.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 6 July 1920.

⁶⁹ *North East Advertiser*, 15 September 1925.

⁷⁰ AOT, Correspondence Relating to the North East Municipal League 1925-1933, letter to Scottsdale Municipality from secretary of North East Municipal League 15 September 1925, (Ref: MCC 33/5).

⁷¹ *ibid.*, North East Municipal League Minute Book 1925-1935, North East Municipal League minutes 27 March 1926, pp. 7-8 (Ref: NS 775/8).

⁷² *ibid.*, NS 775/8, North East Municipal League minutes 27 March 1926 p8; 6 October 1928 p17; 17 May 1933 p31.

⁷³ *ibid.*, NS 775/8, North East Municipal League minutes 20 September 1935, pp. 38-39.

anything beneficial to the municipalities generally'.⁷⁴ Support from other councils was forthcoming and the North West Municipal League was officially formed in February 1922.⁷⁵ The object of the league was the conservation of North West municipal interests and the discussion of matters of general importance to the coast.⁷⁶ The *Advocate* welcomed the league, insisting that:

For a growing and thriving territory such as that which comprises the North West, vigilance and progress must be watchwords. The handicap imposed by distance from the governing centres of the state must be counter-balanced by extra-effort on the part of our citizens if we are to receive that measure of consideration from the government of the day which is necessary to our progress.⁷⁷

Furthermore, greater regional organization was needed to arrest the influence of the cities over government policy.⁷⁸ As in the tourism industry, regionalism arose out of the perceived failings of statewide structures to deliver resources to regional areas and an acknowledgement from existing independent local bodies that they must collectively organize to achieve better outcomes. The interests of the league were unabashedly parochial. As the *Advocate* put it, 'there is a great need for some such organization to act as a watchdog of North West interests...we suggest that the league should demand that recognition which is warranted by the importance of the district with which it serves'.⁷⁹

The league took up the 'watchdog' tag earnestly, particularly in regards to the shipping problem that had a dramatic effect on the fortunes of the North West. The issue is too

⁷⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 21 June 1921.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 17 February 1922.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 15 February 1922.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 6 September 1922.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 15 March 1923.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

large and complex to be given justice here.⁸⁰ Being an island Tasmania was naturally dependent upon the shipping trade and after Federation the state government was particularly anxious to improve maritime transport between the island and the mainland. A select committee was appointed in 1912 to inquire into the matter but came to no definite conclusions, suggesting that greater subsidies or incentives be given to private companies to provide a better and more regular service across Bass Strait.⁸¹ The war had significant consequences. The government requisitioned ships for the war effort, gradually extending its influence until April 1918 when it procured all inter-state steamers owned by Australian companies and formed them into one fleet for more efficient management.⁸² Though the government ceded control of certain ships in 1920, a federal select committee recommended that the inter-state trade continue to be run collectively as to ensure efficiency and adequate services.⁸³ During this period the shipping trade was hit by numerous strikes and industrial disputes, disrupting Tasmanian mails and tourist traffic much to the fury of business and political leaders, eventually resulting in increased costs for shipping companies.⁸⁴ The fear in Tasmania was that with the inter-state shipping trade under a virtual monopoly and with costs rising, services to the island would be rationalized thereby hindering the burgeoning produce and tourism trade. In response, the state government purchased its own line of steamers to compete

⁸⁰ see instead J. P. S. Bach, *A Maritime History of Australia*, (West Melbourne 1976) chp 13 & 14; A. Hudspeth, and L. Scripps, *Capital Port – a history of the marine board of Hobart*, (Hobart 2000) chp 12; P. G. Mercer, *Gateway to Progress*, (Hobart 1969) chp 12.

⁸¹ 'Interstate shipping- report of select committee', *Tasmania: Journal and Printed Papers of Parliament*, JPPP(Tas) 1912 paper no.32 p ii, v, vi.

⁸² 'Select Committee on Sea Carriage', *Commonwealth of Australia: Parliamentary Papers*, (CPP)1920-21, vol. 1 paper no. 1 p1.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p10.

⁸⁴ see Harris, 'Selling Tasmania', p72.

with the main companies but the venture failed dismally, though it did improve for a while the services to the North West.⁸⁵

The state then received another blow by the decision in 1921 to implement the coastal clauses of the *Navigation Act*. The coastal clauses were invoked as part of Australia's general Protection and White Australia policies, and caused such consternation that a Royal Commission was held to investigate the *Navigation Act* in 1923.⁸⁶ Tasmania claimed the coastal clauses hurt her trade as she often relied on foreign owned ships to run mails, passengers and goods on routes that inter-state companies deemed unprofitable. Other provisions in the *Navigation Act* increased the costs of small vessels that operated to little outposts around the state. The commissioners concluded that while 'Hobart is a storm-centre of discontent, Launceston and the North West ports...have little or no complaint against the *Navigation Act*'.⁸⁷ This was because Hobart relied heavily on round-trips made by foreign ships, while the North West and Launceston had benefited by inter-state companies re-routing goods through their ports to maximize efficiency.

However, dissatisfaction across the state continued, and throughout the 1920s numerous Commonwealth and state committees inquired into the condition of maritime transport between Tasmania and the mainland. Most found that, while the Act often unfairly took much of the brunt of criticism for the island's woes, it did have a detrimental effect on a state that relied more heavily on interstate shipping than any other in the Commonwealth. The report by Sir Nicholas Lockyer in 1926 found the Act had been a factor in retarding

⁸⁵ see R. L. Wettenhall, 'State Shipping in Tasmania: an unhappy adventure', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings* vol. 14(2) 1967 pp. 86-93.

⁸⁶ see 'Report of the Royal Commission of the Navigation Act', *CPP*, 1923-24 vol. 11 paper no. 103

⁸⁷ *ibid*, p16.

progress in the island.⁸⁸ Another Commonwealth report of 1927 similarly concluded that 'generally the development of the state has been hindered' as a result of the Act with its industries handicapped and the establishment of new businesses prevented.⁸⁹ It compared shipping services to Tasmania in 1913, 1920 and 1927 and found that there had been a fall in services between Melbourne and Hobart and Sydney and Launceston. While there was effectively no change in services offered on other routes – Melbourne to Launceston, Melbourne to Devonport/Burnie, Sydney to Hobart – high rates meant these services were rarely full utilized.⁹⁰ The committee recommended the repeal of the coastal clauses in the Act and urged the Commonwealth to guarantee an adequate shipping service to the island.⁹¹

Right from its formation the North West municipal league had been active in pushing for an improved and more regular steamer service to coastal ports. Letters were sent to the Premier of the state demanding a report into shipping communications across Bass Strait.⁹² A major grievance was the inadequacy of the *Oonah*,⁹³ which had plied the strait since 1888, but was now considered unsatisfactory to transport mainland tourists. The Leven warden, R. L. Parsons, for instance remarked that even 'under the most favourable circumstances the crossing of the strait is a sickening and pain-racking experience'.⁹⁴ The league wanted either a newer more comfortable and quicker boat or the *Loongana*,⁹⁵

⁸⁸ 'Financial Position of Tasmania as affected by Federation', *CPP*, 1926-28, vol. V, paper no. 24.

⁸⁹ 'Report concerning Communications between Tasmania and the Mainland', *ibid.*, vol. IV paper no. 10 p17 pp. 22-3.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p18.

⁹² See *AOT*, Ulverstone Municipal Council: Correspondence relating to the North West Municipal League, North West Municipal League to Premier 22 July 1925 & 15 February 1927, (Ref: MCC 36/9 227/52).

⁹³ see J. K. Loney, *Bay Steamers and Coastal Ferries*, (Frenchs Forest 1982) p62.

⁹⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 14 February 1927.

⁹⁵ see Loney, *Bay Steamers and Coastal Ferries*, p63.

which served Launceston and occasionally the coast, to be put on the North West run.⁹⁶ But it offered other suggestions to improve the Bass Strait service – that the Tasmanian shipping service be exempt from industrial disputes; that it be a penal offence to disrupt the Victoria-Tasmania mail trade; that the Commonwealth purchase their own ferry to guarantee a service; and that an oil-burning ship be placed on the Bass Strait run.⁹⁷

When it was announced that the Commonwealth Joint Committee of Public Accounts⁹⁸ was looking into the strait service, the league naturally took a keen interest and formed a sub-committee to prepare a detailed statement outlining the shortcomings the coast suffered. In its submission to the Commonwealth, the league stated that the existing shipping service had been an enormous benefit to the two cities, and now it was time for some improvements to the North West. An improved service would ‘go a long way in increasing the capacity of this essentially farming community to stabilize its finances and to check effectively the drift of its men and women to the cities’.⁹⁹

The findings of the public accounts committee, especially its recommendation that a new 18-knot oil-burning vessel with comfortable passenger cabins be placed on a regular run into Burnie, were a major triumph for the league. The *Advocate* noted that without collective action little might have been achieved, because if each district in the region had submitted their own reports doubts would have been raised as to what the coast actually required.¹⁰⁰ The coast eventually got its new boat in the early 1930s.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ *North Western Advocate*, 27 November 1928.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 17 January 1925, 5 March 1925.

⁹⁸ For a brief history of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts, see J. Holmes, ‘The Standing Committee System in the Commonwealth Parliament from 1901 to 1950’, *Australian Quarterly*, 38(4) 1966 pp. 33-7.

⁹⁹ AOT, NS775/8, Statement to Public Accounts Committee on Behalf of North West Municipal League, p7.

¹⁰⁰ *North Western Advocate*, 3 May 1928.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 18 May 1934.

Another interesting feature of regionally organizing is how, given the shipping problems affected all Tasmania, the league often was suspicious of and worked against those from the North and South. As was previously mentioned, Hobart suffered from the re-organization of the shipping trade after the war and consequently her business and political leaders were particularly strident in pushing her claims for an improved service.¹⁰² The league watched these moves zealously and was adamant that services to the coast would not be sacrificed for the benefit of the capital. Having repelled a move in 1932 by the Hobart Chamber of Commerce to re-schedule the *Oonah*, the *Advocate* noted satisfactorily 'the league executive lost no time in getting to work and counteracting the Hobart propaganda, and speaking as it did for this important region its voice carried a degree of authority'.¹⁰³ The league had made similar moves against a call for the *Loongana* solely to serve Launceston and ignore the coast to appease Hobart business interests in 1927.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the coast was not above making claims that Launceston as well was benefiting at the coast's expense and that extra vigilance was required to make sure the coast received its fair share of shipping services.¹⁰⁵

So the municipal councils were alive to the benefits of organizing regionally. The president of the league in 1925, A. S. Lakin, told its annual conference that a lot could be accomplished 'if we pull together and work, not only for our own towns, but for the whole of the North West coast, which is now recognized to be the "pride of Tasmania"'.¹⁰⁶ But such a task was often easier said than done. Petty parochialism at an

¹⁰² see Hudsonspeth, and Scripps, *Capital Port*, chp. 12 & 13.

¹⁰³ *North Western Advocate*, 20 May 1932.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 12 January 1927.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 14 and 15 June 1929.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 4 May 1925.

intra-regional level again worked to either hinder greater co-operation or threaten benefits that had been obtained regionally. For instance, in June 1927 Lakin proposed a progressive and development league on the North West with over 1000 members who each would pay a subscription of 1/. This League he envisaged 'would push the coast for all its worth; watch and see that we have our just rights in all things; and be ready to take up any matter or development work that will benefit the whole of the coast'.¹⁰⁷

While some sympathetically received the idea,¹⁰⁸ Lakin wrote later in July that he was disappointed that the scheme had not gathered greater support.¹⁰⁹ In September the matter was discussed at the Municipal League's annual meeting, where it received a lukewarm response. The main opposition came from the North West Tourist Association, which did not favour a development league established to attract industries to the coast. It argued that local councils, marine boards, and tourist associations should pitch and compete for industries in their localities. 'A united league could not work faithfully for Penguin against Devonport or Ulverstone against Smithton', the Tourist Association's main spokesmen Edward Leeson told the meeting.¹¹⁰ While the proposal for a separate organization was defeated, a compromise was reached with a sub-committee set up within the Municipal League to promote the coast overseas as the ideal place to establish industries.¹¹¹

Lakin's proposal was laid aside during the depression but was revived briefly in June 1933. The objects of the proposed progressive league were to unite all centres on the

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 18 June 1927.

¹⁰⁸ see *ibid.*, 4 July 1927, 'Progressive and Development League' W. J. Bryan, 12 July 1927.

¹⁰⁹ 'Proposed North West Coast Progressive and Development League', A. S. Lakin, *ibid.*, 15 July 1927; see also *AOT*, North West Municipal League: minutes of meeting, 20 July 1927 p4 (Ref: NS 1964 / 2).

¹¹⁰ *North Western Advocate*, 23 September 1927.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 24 September 1927; see also *AOT*, NS 1964/2 minutes of meeting 22 September 1927, p8.

coast so that they will be able to work together for the advancement and recognition of the North West; to encourage the establishment of secondary industries on the coast; and to support useful proposals put forward by towns on the coast and to work whole-heartedly together to carry them out.¹¹² Remarkably having defeated the first attempt at such a proposal, Leeson was now its earnest advocate. 'There is a good community of spirit in each town on the coast, but there is no unity' he wrote to the *Advocate*.¹¹³ The newspaper noted the idea had again been 'coldly received' and with work already done by the North West Municipal League and Tourist Association further duplication was unnecessary.¹¹⁴ The proposal was quickly dropped.

While parochialism here worked against efforts to co-operate at a regional level, it often threatened to undermine benefit that had been achieved regionally. For example, having achieved a slightly better shipping service from the 1920s the coast was anxious to improve it, particularly the mail service. This was part of a greater concern in the state throughout the 1930s at the lack of a regular and efficient mail service to major ports, and various proposals were put to streamline and improve the distribution of mails around the island. In the North West, from an agreement signed in the 1920s Burnie was the primary port of call for mainland mails.

Devonport saw an opportunity in the talk of improving the mail service to press her claims to be the main port of call for mainland mail. Following a suggestion from the public, the Devonport council passed a motion in March 1935 recommending to the North West Municipal League that mail services between Victoria and Tasmania would

¹¹² *North Western Advocate*, 29 June 1933.

¹¹³ 'North West Progressive League', Edward Leeson, *ibid.*, 8 July 1933.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, 7 July 1933.

be accelerated by making Devonport the distributing centre instead of Launceston and Burnie.¹¹⁵ This naturally met opposition from Burnie representatives in the League, which, for its part, while sympathetic to Devonport claims for better service, stressed that the coast as a whole had to work together to ensure that Northern and Southern interests did not usurp existing services to the coast. It proposed that the North West become the sole centre for the distribution of mails for the state.¹¹⁶

Launceston had ambitions in this direction for herself, and proposed in early 1937 that a federal select committee to be appointed to investigate the transport and distribution of mails between the mainland and Tasmania.¹¹⁷ The League as a whole was anxious to protect the coast's interests, it being generally accepted that for some years those in the North and South had been fighting to have the Burnie service altered. But bickering arose between Devonport and Burnie over the respective merits of each of her ports as a distributing centre, and the League was unable to come up with a united front on the issue.¹¹⁸ While the idea for a select committee collapsed, it was announced that assistant-minister for commerce Senator T. C. Brennan would tour the state and inquire into shipping services and the distribution of mails.¹¹⁹ Brennan arrived in May too much fanfare on the North West, and the League was eager to press its concerns about the shipping service to the coast and the effect on the region if mail distribution was relocated to Launceston, which wanted all mails in the state to be landed at Inspection Head at the Tamar.¹²⁰ This proposal also had the backing of the South.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ *AOT*, NS 1964/2, minutes of meeting 4 March 1935, p68.

¹¹⁶ *North Western Advocate*, 5 March 1937.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, 14 January 1937.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, 8 April 1937.

¹²⁰ *Mercury*, 21 May 1937, 24 May 1937.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 25 May 1937.

The bickering between Devonport and Burnie over which port was best for distributing mails statewide vitiated the League. Instead of working through a meeting called by the League to resolve the matter and putting forward a common coastal position to the minister, both Devonport and Burnie gave evidence to Brennan separately¹²² and the League's meeting came to no definite conclusions and was a waste of time.¹²³ The *Advocate* lamented the situation, remarking that 'where the coast is fighting it may have its welfare adversely affected by influences in other parts of the state, whose interests are not identical with our own'.¹²⁴ Fortunately for the coast Brennan was unimpressed with other submissions given to him in Launceston and Hobart.¹²⁵ Indeed, he stated he was not specifically concerned with the mail service at all, and urged aggrieved parties to complain to the postmaster-general about the inadequacy of the mail service and to shipping companies about timetables.¹²⁶ This puzzled most, especially the *Mercury*, which wondered why Brennan had bothered to visit the state at all.¹²⁷ While the whole episode came to naught, it did demonstrate how parochialism at a statewide and intra-regional level threatened to undermine the greater good by creating general insecurity and instability and by hindering efforts for effective political action to achieve desired outcomes.

What conclusions can be made about the growth of regionalism in the North West from the 1920s and 1930s? Regionalism arose out of the perceived failings of statewide structures to deliver resources to regional areas and an acknowledgement from existing

¹²² see *North Western Advocate*, 21 May 1937 and 22 May 1937.

¹²³ AOT, NS 1964 / 2, minutes of meeting 20 May 1937, p98.

¹²⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 22 May 1937.

¹²⁵ see *Mercury*, 24 May 1937.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 25 May 1937.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

independent local bodies that they must collectively organize to achieve better outcomes in difficult economic times. While this suggests that a more regional outlook replaced the localism existing in the North West, the checkered history of both civic and municipal bodies efforts at regional organization suggest otherwise. Despite the earnest effort of some who wished the coast to adopt a common identity, regionalism was used by existing parochial bodies to extract benefits at a statewide level that were then fought over at an intra-regional level. An attachment to locality and localism still existed in spite of greater regional co-operation.

Chapter 5: Local Government Reform in the 1920s and 1930s: pressures from below

In the second chapter it was noted how municipal reform at the turn of the twentieth century was driven largely by financial concerns. Federation of the existing colonies brought with it serious ramifications for the Tasmania treasury, and so, in consequence, greater economy in administration was effected. The following two chapters will further examine how financial pressures throughout the 1920s and 1930s led to proposals for municipal reform. This chapter is particularly concerned with what pressures from below, that is, from the operation and experiences of the municipal councils themselves, led to the state government advocating reform in the municipal system. The state governments of the period comprised of the Nationalist ministries of J. B. Hayes (1922-23), Sir Walter Lee (1916-22, 1923, 1934) and J. C. McPhee (1928-1934). The Labor ministries were those of J. A. Lyons (1923-28) and A. G. Ogilvie (1934-1939).

It will argue that rising overheads and lower revenues in the 1920s led to some local bodies suffering serious financial trouble. The state's Labor government that came to power during this time was generally unsympathetic to the councils, and enacted legislation that replaced financially-stricken councils with government-appointed commissions. The move was generally unpopular, leaving the government to push for reform to make councils more financially viable. This idea was encouraged by the difficulty municipal councils came to have with road maintenance in the 1930s. The need for modern road making plant was beyond most small councils and so tentative suggestions for the amalgamation of municipalities was made. It will conclude by

examining how responsive to major administrative changes the municipal councils were, and what this meant for any attempt at reform.

The Financial Difficulties of the Municipal Councils

The problems for Tasmanian municipal councils after the war began in late 1920, when the state government sought to consolidate the existing awards structure under a new Wages Board bill. If local bodies were to be included in this bill, it threatened to increase their wages paid to their employees by hundreds of pounds, potentially damaging to those small councils and marine boards who would not be able to raise their rates sufficiently to cover the new costs.¹ Before it was put to parliament, councils in the North of the state met in Launceston to protest their inclusion in the proposed legislation, and a petition was soon after sent to Premier Sir Walter Lee.² When debate began on the bill in the House of Assembly local bodies got only the briefest of attention. Lee acknowledged they were unhappy, and left parliament to decide whether they would be included.³ The matter was eventually taken up by E. W. Freeland in the upper chamber, himself a member of the Beaconsfield council, who sought to exclude local bodies from the bill. The rest of the Legislative Council responded unfavourably, and suggested that municipal workers would only go to a Federal arbitration court to obtain an award, and therefore local bodies remained in the legislation.⁴ Its effect was dramatic with municipal salaries increasing sharply. In the Devonport municipality expenditure on salaries in 1920 was £670, in

¹ *North Western Advocate*, 14 October 1920.

² *ibid.*, 18 October 1920.

³ *Mercury*, 24 November 1920.

⁴ *ibid.*, 10 December 1920.

1921 it jumped to £895, by 1925 it had reached £1654. Similarly in the Leven municipality, salaries in 1920 amounted to £850, by 1922 £1365, and by 1926 £1444.⁵ Overall, taking into account all councils in the state, total salaries in 1920 were £45,931, increased to £65,377 in 1921, and by 1925 were £83,347.

Along with rising wages, municipal councils were hit with another financial burden. For a decade before 1920 Devonport and Leven districts had steadily increased in population and importance, placing strain on existing infrastructure and requiring new improvements in lighting, sewerage and water supply. The local councils consequently obtained government loans to carry out this work, and so faced sizeable interest payments. In 1920 the Leven municipality paid £1360 interest on loans, which increased to £2579 by 1927. Likewise, the Devonport municipality paid £3231 in interest in 1920 and £7269 in 1928. Statewide, municipal councils paid some £90,240 of interest on loans in 1920, which had risen to £163,027 by 1927. In 1923 the *Advocate* noticed this growing burden on the councils, noting money ‘which should be spent on roads, streets and other municipal undertakings’ was going to the moneylender.⁶

The early 1920s then saw an increase in fixed overheads of municipal councils. Extra revenue had to be found and general and other rates therefore steadily rose. Statewide, councils in 1920 raised some £74,498 in general rates, which increased to £157,158 in 1925. Total revenue of all councils was £757,060 in 1920, which by 1925 had nearly doubled to £1,398,893. The Devonport and Leven councils followed this trend, raising rates and increasing revenue to meet higher expenditure costs. But the 1920s were economically difficult for Tasmania, and, as the decade wore on, residents became upset

⁵ *Tasmania Statistics*, various volumes.

⁶ *North Western Advocate*, 12 April 1923.

at the amount of tax they had to pay. Feeling that a greater chance of obtaining some relief lay at the local and not state level, councils were continually pressured to lower rates.⁷

Councils struggled with this quandary for the next decade. Their fixed overheads were considerable, eating into revenue. Depressed times meant pressure from ratepayers to keep rates as low as possible, meaning of course less revenue and thereby creating financial pressure on councils. Statewide, they went from collecting £179,660 in general rates in 1926 to £156,838 by 1932, from total receipts of £1,159,004 in 1926 to £859,805 in 1932. With salaries and interest payments remaining steady, savings could only be created by cutting works and services. The Leven municipality spent £10,146 in works and services in 1926, and only £4,508 in 1932. Likewise Devonport municipality spent £25,195 on works and services in 1926 and only £15,869 in 1932. While ratepayers did not wish to pay high rates they naturally still demanded good services - leaving the councils to either ask the government to contribute, borrow more money, or to prioritize works. With the state government increasingly reluctant to add to public debt by floating loans, the councils were therefore left to cut works and services or prioritize them, creating political problems for themselves in the process.

One such example is the emergence of a local ratepayers association in the Devonport municipality in the mid-1920s. The association was formed in protest at the increases of rates and expenditure of the council, and announced its aims as securing a reduction in rates and improving the efficiency and therefore cost of council services.⁸ In August 1925 an executive was created consisting of Magnus Smith, an auctioneer, as president

⁷ see 'Devonport Rates and Assessments' More Economy, *ibid.*, 18 August 1925.

⁸ *ibid.*, 30 July 1925.

and Edwin Ingledew a produce merchant as vice president.⁹ Within a few weeks the association had some 55 paid members and at its first meeting moved a motion declaring ‘that this meeting of ratepayers views with alarm the scale of Devonport council finances, the burdensome rates, and the inequitable assessments, and requests the council to take prompt steps to effect economies in the administration and place its finances on a firm and satisfactory basis’.¹⁰

The association thought the best means of achieving this was to encourage and facilitate greater local democracy. The organization desired ‘to arouse among ratepayers an interest in municipal affairs’, which would then make the council more responsible and accountable in its actions.¹¹ The *Advocate* wholeheartedly agreed with this aim, believing that ‘one of the main causes of the unsatisfactory financial position of some of our institutions is lack of interest on the part of those who have to assist in funding the money’.¹²

The Devonport council initially was favourable to the idea of a ratepayers’ association, especially in light of its public announcement to co-operate with the council, so long as the association’s criticism was constructive.¹³ As part of its aim of making municipal operations more open and accountable, the association sent a lengthy list of questions concerning council finances.¹⁴ In addition, it wrote to other councils around the state with a similar request so that comparisons could be made.¹⁵ Their findings were to be the

⁹ *ibid.*, 6 August 1925 other prominent members were G. N. Levy, E. Keen, W. M. Williams, C. H. Lowe, W. J. C. Reid, B. West, R. Featherstone, W. Innes, T. L. Byard, F. C. Wood.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 21 August 1925.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 1 August 1925.

¹² *ibid.*, 19 August 1925.

¹³ *ibid.*, 8 August 1925.

¹⁴ see *ibid.*, 21 August 1925.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 13 August 1925.

main subject of a public meeting the association intended to hold in early September. But the council did not respond to the association's request for information and boycotted the meeting, which nevertheless concluded that the system of finance in the municipality 'badly required an overhauling'.¹⁶ The council then attacked the association, accusing it of besmirching the reputation of Devonport and holding it up to the ridicule of outsiders.¹⁷

With its relationship with the council deteriorating, the ratepayers association took up the mantle as the official 'opposition' in the municipality. A local orchardist and prominent member Henry Dumbleton, declared that 'the policy of hush is now over; the cat, so long confined, has escaped from the bag and is mewing all over the town, and must be faced, even by councillors'.¹⁸ The association started publishing details of council finances¹⁹ and sent a raft of suggestions to the council for consideration. These included that the question of sewerage be held over for a number of years; that no rates be raised until assessments are equalized; that the question of economy be considered; and that it was necessary to appoint an expert committee to go thoroughly into the council's financial position.²⁰ When the suggestions were met with a terse response,²¹ the association announced it would endorse candidates and contest the municipal elections in 1926.²²

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 9 September 1925.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 10 September 1925.

¹⁸ 'Ratepayers Association' H. Dumbleton, *ibid.*, 12 September 1925.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 28 November 1925.

²⁰ 'Ratepayers Association' H. Dumbleton, *ibid.*, 12 September 1925.

²¹ *ibid.*, 15 September 1925.

²² *ibid.*, 11 February 1926.

So began a short but influential period for the association in council politics. While it scoured the town for businessmen to stand for the council,²³ the association scored a minor victory when the council announced it would reduce rates in the upcoming year in an attempt to lessen the association's influence.²⁴ This did little to help, however, with the association contesting all five seats, winning three, and losing the fourth by a small margin.²⁵ One victorious candidate, F. C. Wood, declared it proved conclusively that the majority of ratepayers were 'fed up with the way things had been allowed to drift in the past and that reforms were long overdue'.²⁶ The new members formed themselves into an informal opposition within the council and pushed for it to be more financially open and accountable. While admitting in March 1927 that a reduction in rates would be some time off, owing to 'mismanagement, bad finance and irregular and under assessment', the ratepayers association nevertheless looked to cut council expenditure and improve efficiency.²⁷ It was successful in its endeavors, receiving sympathetic support from ratepayers, no more so than in 1928 when an association candidate Edgar Keen toppled the existing warden A. W. Marshall in the municipal election.²⁸

The association was not above criticism, particularly from those who charged it with hypocrisy in advocating greater democracy, while beholden to a clique of influential members and dictating to councillors what their positions on council decisions would be.²⁹ How much influence these attacks had on the credibility of the association is

²³ see *ibid.*, 3 March 1926.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 6 March 1926.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 15 June 1926; see also *ibid.*, 23 April 1926, *Mercury*, 23 April 1926.

²⁶ 'Devonport Municipal Matters' F. C. Wood, *North Western Advocate*, 15 June 1926.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 25 March 1927.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 27 April 1928.

²⁹ see 'Devonport Ratepayers Association' Amused, *ibid.*, 11 September 1926; 'Devonport Ratepayers Association' Chas. H. Lowe, *ibid.*, 23 April 1927.

unclear, but all the candidates endorsed by the ratepayers' association were heavily defeated in 1929 council elections.³⁰ The association subsequently went into hiatus, claiming that having effected cuts in expenditure and lowered rates it had reached the end of its usefulness,³¹ but the *Advocate* noted it had suffered from a lack of enthusiasm and activity.³²

The formation of a ratepayer's association was an organized and strident response to ratepayer's general grievances about high local taxation and one impetus towards reforms in the practices of municipal councils. As the great depression took hold, calls again were made for municipal councils to reduce rates for the benefit of local residents who were struggling financially.³³ While the Devonport and Leven council obliged where possible,³⁴ they also struggled with the problem of outstanding rates,³⁵ and the Leven council at one stage suggesting a rebate to those who paid promptly.³⁶ Lower revenue subsequently meant municipal expenditure was cut to a minimum, but the demand for public services did not abate.³⁷ In 1932 the Devonport council, with government assistance, announced a major sewerage scheme for the town. The fear of what effect this would have on municipal finances saw the re-creation of the ratepayers association,³⁸ under a new president V. W. Thomas.³⁹ The reborn association proclaimed itself the 'watchdog of ratepayers' interests',⁴⁰ and earnestly involved itself in monitoring the

³⁰ *ibid.*, 27 April 1929.

³¹ *ibid.*, 8 May 1929.

³² *ibid.*, 6 May 1929.

³³ see *ibid.*, 21 July 1931.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 25 and 26 August 1931.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 14 September 1931.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 16 November 1931.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 26 August 1932.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 28 April 1932.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 20 June 1932.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 20 May 1932.

project and ensuring that the work was carried out with as much economy and efficiency as possible.⁴¹

The combination of rising overheads, the great depression, and the pressure put on councils to lower rates led to increasing financial difficulties for municipal councils in the 1930s. For instance, councils on the North West were still faced with rising administration costs, interest payments, and general expenditure:

Table 5.1: North West Councils Expenditure 1934-1939 (£)

Year	Admin.	Interest	Total Expenditure (all £)
1934-35	8893	10 377	81 224
1935-36	9675	10 505	88 444
1936-37	10 180	11 097	86 146
1937-38	10 461	11 543	91 743
1938-9	11 809	12 598	99 930 ⁴²

This meant either more revenue had to be found or economy exercised. In any case, this was a task easier for the larger municipalities than other smaller counterparts, who required constant diligence in order to balance the books and due care to be taken in handling council finances. Around the state this was sometimes absent in the administration of some local bodies. The annual reports of auditor-general noted serious financial breaches and misappropriation of funds by Brighton (1931), St. Leonards (1932)

⁴¹ see *ibid.*, 1,2,6,8,11,12,20 July 1932.

⁴² *Tasmania Statistics*, various volumes 1934-1939, part VI, section II. The councils included were Burnie, Circular Head, Deloraine, Kentish, King Island, Latrobe, Leven, Penguin and Table Cape.

and New Norfolk (1933) municipalities.⁴³ In 1934 the accounts of Sorell and Huon municipalities were described as being in an 'incomplete and chaotic' state.⁴⁴

In June 1934 a special meeting of the Zeehan council was held to discuss the latest report from the auditor-general concerning the municipality's finances. The report noted the council had outstanding debts far in excess of total rates received, and was scathing of its general performance. It concluded that 'a perusal of the resolutions passed at various times compared with the subsequent action and instructions indicates vacillation, uncertainty, and inconsistency – conspicuous symptoms of bad administration'.⁴⁵ However, the council was also a victim of unfortunate circumstances. At the turn of the century when towns on the West Coast thrived, the Zeehan council had been forced to take out large loans to install necessary infrastructure. But problems with the mines at Zeehan, competition from neighbouring towns, and a depressed mining industry after the war took its toll on the town and it shrank in size dramatically.⁴⁶ The result was that a small population had been unable to shoulder the burden of large interest repayments.⁴⁷ In June 1934 a motion to have representatives from the audit department take charge of council finances was narrowly defeated.⁴⁸ In September, with the council in great difficulty, five out of nine councillors resigned⁴⁹ and on 1 October a government commission was appointed to take charge of the municipality.⁵⁰

⁴³ Auditor-General annual report 1931, *Tasmania: Journal and Printed Papers of Parliament*, JPPP(Tas) paper no. 8 p71; Auditor-General annual report 1932, *ibid*, 1932, paper no. 13 p64; Auditor-General annual report 1933, *ibid*, 1933, paper no. 19 p75.

⁴⁴ Auditor-General annual report 1934, *ibid*, 1934, paper no. 18, p73.

⁴⁵ *Mercury*, 6 June 1934.

⁴⁶ G. Blainey, *The Peaks of Lyell*, (Carlton 1959) pp. 237-8.

⁴⁷ *Mercury*, 31 January 1936.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 6 June 1934.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 27 September 1934.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 1 October 1934.

In 1935 the accounts of the Leven Harbor Trust were examined and revealed the misappropriation of funds, falsification of assessment rolls, and irregularities in collecting and stating rates.⁵¹ A further investigation uncovered illegal breaches in the construction of a new wharf that had resulted in a considerable debt, trustees trading with the Trust and then seeking to deceive the government auditor, and a laxity in collecting outstanding rates.⁵² The government agreed to assist the trust only on condition that the existing trustees resign with government appointed trustees to take their place. This occurred, and later was formally stated with the passing of the *Leven Harbor Trust Commission Act 1936*, which appointed a government commission of three to administer the affairs of the trust for two years from July 1936.⁵³ By this time as well, the George Town council had ceded its responsibilities to a government commission in January 1936 due to its perilous financial state.⁵⁴

The plight of the Zeehan and George Town municipal councils, along with the Leven Harbor Trust, annoyed the government, particularly the Premier A. G. Ogilvie.⁵⁵ It was the main impetus for the government introducing the Statutory Authorities Administration bill into parliament in the middle of 1936.⁵⁶ The bill sought to place in the hands of the governor-in-council the power to appoint a commission where it was shown upon the report of the auditor-general that the financial affairs of any local authority were unsatisfactory or that the authority had been guilty of default or

⁵¹ Auditor-General annual report 1935, *JPPP(Tas)*, 1935, paper no. 32, p92.

⁵² Auditor-General annual report 1936, *ibid.*, 1936, paper no. 27 pp. 142-3.

⁵³ Auditor-General annual report 1936, *ibid.*, 1936, p143, *Leven Harbor Trust Commission Act 1936* see also *Mercury* 10, 11, 13 June 1936, 30 July 1936.

⁵⁴ see *George Town Act 1936*; *Mercury* 19 December 1935.

⁵⁵ For an account of Ogilvie's political career, see M. Roe, 'A. G. Ogilvie and the Blend of Van Diemen's Land with Tasmania', *Bulletin of the Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies*, vol. 1(2) 1986 pp. 39-59.

⁵⁶ see *ibid.*, 26 November 1937.

mismanagement. The Premier pointed out that the government had no real power to remove incompetent trustees if they refused voluntarily to give up office; power to appoint commissions was severely limited under the existing *Local Government Act* or else required a special bill to go through parliament. The aim of the legislation was to enable the government quickly to appoint commissions with as little trouble as possible when required.⁵⁷ As Treasurer Edward Dwyer-Grey noted in a memo to Ogilvie, 'I cannot for the life of me see why wrongdoers of any sort should be allowed to escape punishment, once the government of the day has authentic knowledge of their wrongful proceedings'.⁵⁸

The bill was fervently criticized by the opposition Nationalist Party, whose leader H. S. Baker argued that it empowered government to alter the laws of all institutions that operated in the state. One of his colleagues remarked it threatened to 'wipe out' democracy in Tasmania.⁵⁹ This was the opinion of most newspaper editorials as well. The *Advocate* noted that the bill 'which a professedly democratic government has introduced has not a democratic flavor'.⁶⁰ If it were passed, local government would henceforth be forever at the mercy of parliament. With such criticism, the bill was handed to a joint committee to be scrutinized further.⁶¹

In the meantime, a general state election was held in February 1937. The Nationalist Party made local government a minor issue, accusing the Labor Party and particularly

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 31 July 1936.

⁵⁸ *Archives Office of Tasmania* (AOT), Premier's Department: General Correspondence files, Statutory Authorities Administration Bill file, Dwyer-Grey to Ogilvie 16 June 1936, (Ref: PD 1 1936 file no. 107/13).

⁵⁹ *Mercury*, 31 July 1936.

⁶⁰ *North Western Advocate*, 9 September 1936.

⁶¹ see 'Statutory Authorities Administration bill 1936 – report of joint committee', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1937, paper no. 26.

Ogilvie of wanting to abolish it.⁶² One Nationalist candidate G. L. Doyle alleged it was all part of a general socialist and communist policy.⁶³ Another made the connection between Ogilvie's admiration for the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and the Statutory Authorities Administration bill, which was a plot to usurp all local democracy into the hands of an increasingly autocratic central government.⁶⁴ The Nationalist Party in contrast promised to encourage and strengthen local government, and protect it against arbitrary interference from the government of the state.⁶⁵

Much was made of the government, particularly Ogilvie's, interference in the affairs of the Tasman municipality. Residents of the municipality had petitioned the government in 1934 to look into the conduct of the local council clerk and clerk of petty sessions Eric Heyward.⁶⁶ It was alleged that Heyward had been involved in some impropriety, and a subsequent board of inquiry found this was the case.⁶⁷ The government decided that Heyward needed to be replaced, and asked the Tasman Council to find another council clerk.⁶⁸ It refused, and the matter drifted until 1936 when Ogilvie threatened to withhold government funds from the council unless Heyward was dismissed.⁶⁹ It subsequently did so, until a new clerk was appointed.⁷⁰ Baker attacked Ogilvie's behaviour, describing it as a 'miserable and contemptible vendetta against one individual'.⁷¹

⁶² see *North Western Advocate*, 27 January 1937.

⁶³ *Mercury*, 27 January 1937.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 17 February 1937.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 26 January 1937; see also *North Western Advocate*, 20 February 1937.

⁶⁶ 'Tasman Council Affairs', G. W. Brimage, *Mercury*, 16 May 1936.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 19 September 1934.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 4 October 1934; see also AOT, Premier's Department: General Correspondence files, Tasman Municipal Affairs file, (Ref: PD 1 1936 file no. 73/2).

⁶⁹ *Mercury*, 8 April 1936.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 7 May 1936.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 29 July 1936.

On the eve of the election, the *Mercury* opined that the Labor government had lost considerable support in country areas through its interference in the Tasman municipality.⁷² However, Labor had an handsome victory, and Ogilvie gloated that strong polling in Tasman and other municipal areas taken over by government commissions had vindicated the decision of his government to help struggling municipalities.⁷³ With this perceived public support, and pressure from within the Labor Party to bring about substantial municipal reform,⁷⁴ the government went ahead with a re-drafted Statutory Authorities Administration bill to put to the new session of parliament in 1937.

Opposition to the bill argued that it was not designed to assist local bodies to function properly, but was punitive.⁷⁵ The joint committee recommended that a statutory authority should be entitled to a comprehensive review of the case made against it before a commission was appointed.⁷⁶ The Municipal Association thought that ratepayers should have some say in those who were to be appointed to govern their affairs, that the term “unsatisfactory” in reference to the management of councils in the legislation be more precisely defined, and that a council should not be disbanded without parliament approval.⁷⁷ A large conference of civic and municipal representatives meeting in Hobart when the bill was being put through parliament, saw the legislation as infringing upon the principles of local government, and so voted unanimously that it be rejected.⁷⁸ Faced

⁷² *ibid.*, 18 February 1937.

⁷³ *ibid.*, 22 February 1937.

⁷⁴ see the annual Tasmania Labor Party Conference 1937, motion of the branch no. 1 of Launceston, *ibid.*, 4 March 1937.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 26 November 1937.

⁷⁶ ‘Statutory Authorities Administration bill 1936 – report of joint committee’, *JPPP(Tas)*, 1937, paper no. 26 p6.

⁷⁷ *North Western Advocate*, 6 November 1937.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 18 November 1937.

with such opposition concessions were granted by the government. The most significant was that a commission could hold office for twelve months, and then would have to seek the consent of parliament for any extension.⁷⁹ The bill scraped through the upper chamber by one vote⁸⁰ and provoked much apprehension. The *Advocate* worried it would enable the government legally 'to deprive one after the other of the present councils their independent existence'.⁸¹

The Act looked as though it might become necessary as more councils lurched into financial trouble. From the beginning of the 1930s the Glenorchy council increasingly had problems with its finances. In early 1934 its wards accounts were overdrawn by thousands of pounds, and the council cut its expenditure.⁸² By October 1936 the position of the council's finances had become serious, as it suffered from outstanding rates, irregular assessments, and a reliance on its water account to carry other accounts that were in deficit.⁸³ Ogilvie met with the council and told them that the audit department was dissatisfied with its finances, and unless they did something to fix them the government would have no option but to appoint a commission to do it for them. The council quickly created a committee to look into its financial situation.⁸⁴

The problem was beyond their control and, after a meeting with the deputy Auditor-General F. J. Batt, at its meeting in December five members from the council resigned. One of them, H. L. Batten, admitted the affairs of the municipality were in a 'hopeless position' with 'incompetence so definitely rife'.⁸⁵ Batt in his audit report of the council

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 3 December 1937.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 18 November 1937.

⁸² *Mercury*, 6 February 1934.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 4 December 1936.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 21 October 1936.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 2 December 1936.

that year, subsequently tabled in parliament, criticized the council. He noted that there was evidence 'that councillors had abused the powers vested in them for the benefit of themselves and/or their own particular friends'.⁸⁶ The council's problems originated from a resistance to raising rates to deal with increasing expenditure, and a liberal tendency in collecting outstanding rates, both of which were coyly admitted by some councillors as they resigned.⁸⁷ Ogilvie announced it would take some years to put the affairs of the municipality in order.⁸⁸ *The Mercury* declared that it did not seem right that councillors 'should be able quite so simply to divest themselves of responsibility and leave the mess to be cleaned up by the government'.⁸⁹ This seemed certain to occur more often, as the government had fears over the solvency of Circular Head and New Norfolk.⁹⁰

By 1938 the councils of Scottsdale and Ringarooma in the North East were in trouble.⁹¹ Like Glenorchy, and many other councils, the Scottsdale council from the early 1930s had an increasing problem with outstanding rates. From £1726 owing in 1931, to £2783 by 30 June 1935.⁹² By 1936 this had left the council in a serious financial situation, and a greater effort was made to collect outstanding rates and check expenditure.⁹³ But little changed, and by February 1938 it was announced that some £4,400 in rates was still outstanding.⁹⁴ The audit department looked closely into the council's finances and its findings were startling. The council it found had 71 per cent of its rates outstanding, had

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 4 December 1936.

⁸⁷ see F. J. Hyndes, *ibid.*, 2 December 1936.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 4 December 1936; see also *AOT*, Premier's Department: General Correspondence files, Glenorchy Municipal Affairs file, (Ref: PD 1 1936 file no. 73/12).

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Mercury*, 6 December 1937.

⁹¹ for Ringarooma council debates over whether to ask for a commission, see *North East Advertiser*, 14 January 1938, 18 February 1938, 18 March 1938, 17 June 1939, 12 July 1938, 22 July 1938, 26 August 1938, 16 September 1938.

⁹² *ibid.*, 7 April 1930.

⁹³ *ibid.*, 4 August 1936, 8 December 1936.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 5 April 1938.

misapplied funds from electric light and water accounts to finance road repairs, and four of its members – A. M. Osborne, J. B. McGilp, H. G. Sailer (who had been warden for twelve years) and E. O. Jones – had not paid their rates for six months, making them ineligible to sit on the council.⁹⁵ The municipality received a further blow when the Warden H. Craw, who was leaving the district, resigned soon after the four with outstanding rates had done so, leaving the council without a quorum and so unable to function.⁹⁶ The government announced that a commission consisting of Donald McLennan, C. S. Northeast, and H. E. Roberts would take over the affairs of the municipality. The *North East Advertiser* was stunned, noting the news of the collapse of the council had ‘come as a kind of bombshell to the residents of the district’.⁹⁷

In his 1938 report the now Auditor-General F. J. Batt outlined to parliament irregularities that had caused serious financial situations for other municipal councils. The Glamorgan and Longford municipalities had an unusually large proportion of administrative expenses charged to each of its road rate accounts, which had reduced its efficiency and works.⁹⁸ Burnie, Circular Head and Penguin councils all struggled with the problem of outstanding rates, which resulted in them resorting to overdrafts at the bank to finance their expenditure.⁹⁹ Batt concluded that outstanding rates was ‘undoubtedly largely responsible’ for the difficult financial position that many municipalities found themselves in.¹⁰⁰ He recommended that councils review their

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 2 August 1938.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 5 August 1938.

⁹⁸ see Auditor-General annual report 1938, *JPPP(Tas)*, 1938, paper no. 22 p142, 146.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 137-147.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p148.

existing methods of demanding, collecting and expending municipal revenue and adopt a procedure that would produce better results.¹⁰¹

The collection of rates was hampered by the time it took councils to organize and publish municipal assessment rolls. This was a long-time grievance of the councils, and it was openly admitted that councillors did not have the time or the expertise to diligently fix assessments so that anomalies on rolls would cease.¹⁰² Municipal councils had long advocated that a joint roll should be used for government and municipal rating, primarily because the government would appropriate the time-consuming labour and financial cost that went into producing such rolls.

The government by 1936 was looking into the issue of land valuation in order to increase its revenue, and as a consequence the Auditor-General began a comprehensive examination of assessments shown on various municipal rolls.¹⁰³ Having examined some 26 municipal rolls in 1938, the auditor-general reported that numerous discrepancies and irregularities had been found. These included the annual values of many properties having been assessed at below three per cent of the capital value as shown on the government land valuation roll contrary to existing law; that many properties had been omitted altogether from the municipal roll and had not been charged rates for up to 25 years in some cases; and that discrepancies between government and municipal rolls in defining the area of properties had resulted in the wrong description of properties on municipal rolls.¹⁰⁴ These errors cost the councils revenue. The auditor-general estimated

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p137.

¹⁰² *North Western Advocate*, 21 February 1933.

¹⁰³ see Auditor-General annual report 1938, *JPPP(Tas)*, 1938, paper no. 22, p150.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

that from under-assessed properties the councils lost some £1439 in rates each year, and some £354 in properties omitted from rolls.¹⁰⁵

Batt also found that capital values shown on the land valuation rolls did not disclose the present day value of properties. Since rates were determined from the value of these properties, the council's again were missing out on considerable revenue. In light of all this, the auditor-general recommended that the adoption of a joint roll for the purposes of government and municipal rating be considered.¹⁰⁶

The financial difficulties faced by councils in the 1930s were an impetus towards administrative reform of local government in Tasmania. Increased expenditure and problems in collecting revenues encouraged the re-organization of municipal assessments. More importantly, the collapse of several councils and their required replacement with government appointed commissions suggested that something was wrong with the municipal system in the state, and that unless given help some municipal councils would become increasingly less able to carry out their duties. The *Statutory Authorities Administration Act 1936* was a significant precursor to a major shakeup of the municipal system on the island. After it was passed the government demonstrated that it would no longer tolerate municipal councils that were fiscally irresponsible. But the apprehension over the powers given to the government in the Act meant that, if it wished to avoid the controversy that went with appointing commissions, the government would have to overhaul the system to make municipal councils more financially viable. The

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p151.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p152; see also 'Special Report of Auditor-General on 1936-7 municipal assessment rolls of all municipalities', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1939, paper no. 24

Statutory Authorities Administration Act was one important pressure towards wholesale reform, another was the problem of road maintenance.

Road Maintenance and Municipal Reform.

Road maintenance had long been considered an important function best left to local authorities. From the early beginnings of responsible self-government, legislation was passed enabling road districts and trusts to be established and to levy rates in order to construct and maintain roads. Even when the *Main Roads Act* 1880 took control of main roads from local road districts and placed them under the auspices of the Minister for Lands and Works, annual grants from parliament towards the preservation of such roads was monitored by a local Main Road Board.¹⁰⁷ The idea that the most effective and efficient means of maintaining important roads lay in the hands of locals rather than a distant government department quickly became entrenched throughout the island.¹⁰⁸ This was particularly so, as we saw in the first two chapters, when access to quality roads and control of road funds could mean the success or failure of fledgling settlements.

This was the case until the 1870s, which heralded the rise and spread of rail lines around the colony.¹⁰⁹ While these railways were plagued with problems and were never commercially successful, they did absorb considerable fiscal and material resources. This was because rail promised to be a more economical, reliable and faster means of travel

¹⁰⁷ see K. R. Von Steiglitz, *A History of Local Government in Tasmania: from the earliest settlement of Van Diemen's Land to the present times*, (Hobart 1958) pp. 136-7.

¹⁰⁸ see 'Road Trust System of the Colony – report of select committee', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1886, paper no. 160 p1v-v.

¹⁰⁹ see W. A. Townsley, 'The Launceston and Western Railway Company: how the railway age came to Tasmania', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 3(1) 1953 pp. 4-12.

than roads. This was reflected in government spending. For example, Australia-wide between 1860 and 1890 money spent on rail took up some 50 per cent of capital compared to roads of some 10 to 15 per cent.¹¹⁰ Naturally, this resulted in a general neglect of roads, with the state government happy to leave their general welfare in the hands of local bodies. To this end they were undoubtedly helped with the increased resources created by the *Local Government Act* 1906 which reduced the existing 106 road districts into 47 municipalities. In the first decade of their existence new municipal councils diligently carried out their duties, with their biggest problem being the damage often caused by traction engines.

This all changed after the First World War. The 1920s saw the development and gradual popularity of the automobile, and, as the decade wore on, it became less of an item of luxury for the well off and increasingly a necessity for business and citizens alike. Motor vehicles not only strained existing infrastructure but demanded high-quality roads, and pressure was put on government to increase its spending on road infrastructure. This resulted in the Commonwealth government passing the *Main Roads Development Act* in 1923 that provided general funds to the states for the development and expansion of roads as long as they contributed significant monies for the same purpose themselves.¹¹¹ Along with these funds, the Tasmanian government adopted a user-pay principle and taxed motor users for utilizing their vehicles. It also looked to the municipal councils to increase their expenditure on roads in their municipalities.

¹¹⁰ M. G. Lay, *Source Book for Australian Roads*, (Vermont South 1981) pp. 18-19; see also N. G. Butlin, *Investment in Australian Economic Development 1861-1900*, (Cambridge 1964) chp. V pt. 2 pp. 299-333

¹¹¹ Lay, *ibid.*, p19; K. G. Ramussen, 'Administration of road finance in Tasmania', (Dip.Pub. Admin. Uni. of Tasmania, 1961) p7.

The councils obliged. Statewide, in 1920 they raised £65,241 in road rates and this increased to £112,515 by 1927. The councils of the North West raised £17,407 in 1920, which had increased to £30,242 by 1926.¹¹² But it is safe to say that councils were unprepared for the motor boom in the 1920s and the stresses it would place on their resources. Rising council overheads began to eat into revenue that had traditionally been designated for road maintenance, and councils found that their existing funds could not cover their required works.¹¹³ The councils were paying a considerable portion for the upkeep of main roads - £9583 to the government's contribution of £13,315 in 1920-21, £12,871 to the government's £17,700 in 1921-22, and £19,997 to the government's £33,575 in 1925-26. It was here that they demanded relief, and at the 1923 and 1925 municipal conference urged that the government should take control of all main roads and leave councils to maintain by-roads in their municipalities.¹¹⁴ Eventually their contribution was fixed at £20,000 per year.¹¹⁵

It did little to arrest their difficulties. The depression and the demand for lower rates meant cuts in expenditure and subsequently less money for road maintenance. In 1929-30 the total revenue from road rates statewide was £105,912, which had decreased by 1933-34 to £85,120. When the depression lifted in the mid-1930s the councils confronted a new problem with deteriorating roads and the increased volume of traffic upon them requiring the use of a modern road plant to keep them in good shape.¹¹⁶ This

¹¹² The councils included were Circular Head, Deloraine, Emu Bay, Kentish, King Island, Latrobe, Leven, Penguin and Table Cape.

¹¹³ see 'Devonport Municipal Affairs', *The Nomad North Western Advocate*, 19 May 1923.

¹¹⁴ *AOT*, Municipal Association of Tasmania: Printed Copies of Minutes, 1923 conference minutes p13, 1925 conference minutes p8 (Ref: CB 52/6/1)

¹¹⁵ see 'Report of Main Roads Commission', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1925-26 paper no. 22.

¹¹⁶ *North Western Advocate*, 28 May 1937.

the councils, especially the smaller country councils, could not afford to do.¹¹⁷ As a result, the Chief Secretary Claude James, in the *Case for Tasmania* 1934, noted that the municipalities 'have now under their control far more roads than they can maintain, and there is a constant pressure on the state for taking over some of the roads now controlled by them'.¹¹⁸ Where the councils were spending an average of £9 per mile on maintenance, the public works department estimated a minimum of £20 per mile was needed to keep the roads that the state had built from deteriorating further.¹¹⁹

The problem of road maintenance was a serious issue for the government and municipal councils. In 1935 the Minister for Lands and Work T. H. Davies announced that 10,000 miles of municipal roads were depreciating in value due to the municipalities not carrying out as much maintenance as they should.¹²⁰ Unable to purchase plant equipment, thereby having to rely on government machinery to do the job, usually with delays, the councils found themselves in a bind. One option was to relinquish most if not all road maintenance to the government, something the councils, given their traditional attachment to local control, was reluctant to do. The councils also feared that to relinquish road maintenance would set a precedent for the state government to take over more local duties, thereby slowly extinguishing local government itself. The other equally unpleasant option was to amalgamate existing municipalities into bigger entities that could afford to purchase and manage the modern machinery required for road maintenance. This proposal was floated by Municipal Association president E. W.

¹¹⁷ AOT, CB 52/6/1, 1935 conference minutes, p17.

¹¹⁸ 'The Case for Tasmania – statement to Commonwealth Grants Commission', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1934, paper no. 2 p5.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ AOT, CB 52/6/1, 1935 conference minutes, p10.

Freeland at its annual conference in 1938. It was met with a lukewarm response from the council representatives, who were dubious whether amalgamation would have that desired effect.¹²¹

But the municipal councils acknowledged there was a problem. In March 1937 the Leven council passed a resolution that it was now 'impossible to maintain the roads in the back districts', and appealed to the North West Municipal League for help.¹²² The league met a month later and discussed the issue, concluding that the maintenance of roads 'had got completely beyond the finances of the municipal councils'.¹²³ It raised the problem at the annual conference of the Municipal Association in 1938, with little solutions offered. The warden for Clarence, B. O. Plummer, admitting that 'there was not one municipality in Tasmania able to maintain its roads satisfactory'.¹²⁴ The need to resolve the problem of road maintenance was another impetus towards reforming the municipal system in the state.

So it is apparent that poor financial circumstances, the problem of road maintenance, and organized ratepayer groups were pressures towards reform in the administration and system of municipal government in Tasmania throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The last issue that remains unresolved is how responsive to administrative change were the municipal councils themselves? As was just noted, and will be further explored in the next chapter, the municipal councils were apprehensive about amalgamation. They were generally less reluctant to embrace other reforms in municipal practice that were continually put to their annual municipal conferences.

¹²¹ *North Western Advocate*, 20 May 1938, 15 August 1938.

¹²² *ibid.*, 15 March 1937.

¹²³ *ibid.*, 8 April. 1937.

¹²⁴ AOT, CB 52/6/1, 1938 conference minutes, p13.

For example, in 1915 the conference voted to oppose any moves that would alter the municipal franchise from those who owned property to a more general adult franchise.¹²⁵ That year they also voted down a proposal paying councillors for services rendered, being wary of encouraging 'professional councillors like they had professional politicians'.¹²⁶ In 1917 a motion was withdrawn that proposed the warden be elected by the ratepayers of the municipality;¹²⁷ it was put and again lost in 1930.¹²⁸ In 1926 a motion to introduce rating on unimproved values was lost,¹²⁹ in 1932 a proposal to have council elections every three years and all councillors up for election was defeated,¹³⁰ as was a 1935 proposal to lower the voting age to those under 21.¹³¹

The councils were cautious about changes that threatened to alter the way they conducted municipal business. But these proposals were matters of principle to a certain extent, not just of expediency. The councils were always more responsive to solving matters that appeared and hampered the smooth running of the municipality. They pushed, and received, legislative changes in the *Local Government Act* including the operation of ferries (1920); the distribution of electricity (1924); control of petrol pumps (1929) and the administration of tolls (1938). Changes were made in 1921, 1930 and 1932 to give councils power to regulate the use of roads for carriage and timber-carting.

Another example of municipal reform was the issue of altering the internal or wards boundaries within a municipality. As in the Devonport district, the issue of ward boundaries had been particularly sensitive in the early history of the Leven municipality.

¹²⁵ AOT, CB 52/6/1, 1915 conference minutes, p18.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, 1917 conference minutes, p21.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 1930 conference minutes, p17.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, 1926 conference minutes, p10.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, 1932 conference minutes, p15.

¹³¹ *ibid.*, 1935 conference minutes, p13.

In response, the council proposed to the annual conference in 1916 that either the procedure for altering internal boundaries be simplified or councils be given the exclusive power to change boundaries when the need arose.¹³² While it failed, the next year a motion was passed by the conference asking the government that the *Local Government Act* 'be amended to provide a simpler method for alteration of boundaries, wards and establishment of new wards'.¹³³ The government refused, feeling that it would tend to destabilize municipalities through potentially constant agitation for boundary changes.

In Devonport, however, a feeling grew that a council composed of 15 members was too unwieldy for the efficient carrying out of municipal business. Unable easily to change the ward boundaries to reduce the number, the council instead advocated reducing the number of councillors per ward from three to two. It put this proposal to a series of municipal association conferences in 1918, 1926 and 1929.¹³⁴ The conference opposed the proposal on principle, and it was defeated each time.

By the start of the 1930s financial pressures and the growing demands of road maintenance were beginning to expose the limitations of the ward system. The annual value of the North ward of Devonport in 1929 was nearly twice that of either the Central, Don or South wards, and nearly three times the amount of the Torquay ward.¹³⁵ Because of fears from country and smaller interests, the ward system had been established to ensure that the needs of these areas would be adequately met. This was achieved by the provision that at least three-fifths of road rates that were raised in a ward had to be spent there. This stopped the appropriation of funds from one district to another, for

¹³² *ibid.*, 1916 conference minutes, p16.

¹³³ *ibid.*, 1917 conference minutes, p21.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, 1918 conference minutes, p21; 1926 conference minutes p10; 1929 conference minutes p20.

¹³⁵ *North Western Advocate*, 27 August 1929.

example from Formby fleecing Torquay residents or the town of Devonport from siphoning all the funds from country residents. However, this worked only if annual values were relatively equal, otherwise wards with lower annual values to other wards would become disadvantaged over time anyway, given that more funds will eventually be spent in wards of bigger annual values.

Such was the situation in Devonport. For instance, during the 1930s the road revenue and expenditure from the five wards of the municipality was as follows:

Table 5.2: Devonport ward road revenue and expenditure 1930-1937 (£)

	<i>North Ward</i>		<i>Central ward</i>		<i>South ward</i>		<i>Torquay ward</i>		<i>Don ward</i>	
Year ended	Rates Raised	Rates Spent	Rates Raised	Rates Spent	Rates Raised	Rates Spent	Rates Raised	Rates Spent	Rates Raised	Rates Spent
1930	2,335	1,823	1,040	754	1,150	837	652	266	1,506	957
1931	1,808	1,011	1,151	1,042	1,037	521	723	490	909	616
1932	1,655	1,067	859	683	940	662	964	710	1,404	1,216
1933	1,597	902	829	577	790	535	552	351	1,031	341
1934	1,642	1,181	854	709	862	761	703	551	936	524
1935	1,796	1,470	1,114	1,026	1,030	903	650	375	1,068	950
1936	1,608	1,097	885	490	919	630	421	287	966	848
1937	1,659	1,458	892	722	850	671	549	410	987	772 ¹³⁶

While four wards struggled to finance road maintenance and other works, the North ward was in a healthy state, but there were limits to how much revenue from its funds could be expended elsewhere in the municipality. From 1929 the council entertained the idea of reducing the number of wards on the Western side of the Mersey River from three to two.¹³⁷ But it took W. G. Carey, a member of the South ward, in 1931 formally to

¹³⁶ *Tasmanian Government Gazette*, various volumes 1931-1937.

¹³⁷ *North Western Advocate*, 28 June 1929.

propose and push a scheme of reform. He advocated a committee to inquire into reducing the number of town wards in the municipality from four to two, by dividing the town by a boundary running East to West. This would decrease the number of councillors from 15 to 9, and equalize the amounts of annual value.¹³⁸

While the proposal received strong support in the town, Torquay residents were apprehensive about the scheme, fearing that they would most likely lose local representation on the council table as a result.¹³⁹ This had often been considered important for those on the Eastern side of the Mersey, to ensure that its needs were heard and defended, as well as being a reassurance against a traditional anxiety of neglect and domination from those at Formby. Aware of this, proponents of the scheme pointed out that a revision of boundaries would mean greater revenue and eventually better roads for East Devonport, a tactic that seems to have worked with more support forthcoming over the river.¹⁴⁰

But for all these efforts, the scheme languished in committee, the *Advocate* noting by mid-1932 that little seemed to be coming of it.¹⁴¹ It was briefly revived in 1933 by the reborn ratepayers' association, which circulated a petition requesting an alteration of boundaries under the *Local Government Act*. But the cumbersome procedure and vast number of names (some 1000) this required for it to be valid worked to defeat the movement.¹⁴² It was taken up again in 1936 after the smaller wards were increasingly having difficulty discharging their obligations due to financial trouble. The Warden E. T.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, 15 July 1931.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, 25 July 1931.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 5 August, 3 September 1931.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, 29 August 1932.

¹⁴² *ibid.*, 13 February, 6 March, 8 September 1933.

Clements advocated two wards, which would change the current distribution of annual values from North Ward £25,773, Central £12,898, South £13,464 and Torquay £6,866 to a new North ward of £30,328 and South ward of £28,673.¹⁴³

The scheme split the council and aroused some opposition from councillors who thought it would result in the domination of the council by country members. Eventually, the proposal was agreed to and a petition was sent out requiring the names of one-fifth of the ratepayers.¹⁴⁴ Though there was still some apprehension in East Devonport, the petition was freely signed but struggled to attract the required numbers. This activity in Devonport encouraged those in the Leven municipality in 1937 to examine their boundaries. The country wards in that municipality were struggling with road maintenance, and it was thought that it would be more efficient to create bigger wards to deal with the problem. There was a general skepticism of the benefits of a re-adjustment, along with some communities like Abbotsham not willing potentially to give up representation on the council table, and the matter languished in committee.¹⁴⁵

The councils then had a mixed record when it came to municipal reform. Generally, they resisted change if it were a matter of principle or thought it not really necessary. They were more responsive to reform only after serious problems had arisen that had affected the way they conducted municipal business. Put more eloquently by Michael Oakeshott, they believed 'innovation which is a response to some specific defect, one designed to redress some specific dis-equilibrium, is more desirable than one which springs from a notion of a generally improved condition of human circumstances, and is

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, 13 October 1936.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 16 August, 11 October, 15 November 1937.

far more desirable than one generated by a vision of perfection'.¹⁴⁶ The implication for major municipal reform or amalgamation from this view was clear: only if councils thought there was serious problems that needed fixing would reform be viewed positively.

A strong case, however, could be put forward for suggesting that there was something seriously wrong with the municipal system in the state. By the mid-1930s some municipal councils had collapsed, others were in financial difficulty due to higher overhead and expenditure, while battling to raise enough revenue. The councils were also struggling to discharge properly one of their most important traditional duties – the maintenance of roads. Certainly some reform was needed, but, as at the turn of the century, the state government had to convince skeptical local bodies that it was due.

¹⁴⁶ M. Oakeshott, 'On Being Conservative', in M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics: and other essays*, (New York 1962) p172.

Chapter 6: Local Government Reform in the 1920s and 1930s: pressures from above

The previous chapter outlined some of the pressures from below, primarily the perilous financial situation of some councils and the general problem of road maintenance, that led the state government to advocate reform in the municipal system. It concluded by suggesting that the conservative nature of the councils led them to be wary of proposed wholesale reform. This chapter will examine the pressures from 'above', that is from the Commonwealth government, that were put on the state government to enact local government reform.

At the turn of the century, a re-organization of the government system in Australia led eventually to changes being made in the sphere of local government. At the time local bodies resisted change, but the pressures put on the state government meant that some compromise leading to reform was necessary. This chapter will look at how this trend continued in the 1920s and 1930s. Where Federation was an instigator for reform in 1906, this time it was the restructure of Commonwealth-state financial relations in the 1930s that acted as an impetus. In the 1920s the state government proposed changes in the municipal system but made little headway. This was due to popular opinion in the 1920s blaming Federation and the Commonwealth for Tasmania's ills, and only significant changes in that sphere would bring economy relief. In the 1930s, however, the state was forced to become more responsible for its financial problems, and to scrutinize its existing administrative practices.. The problems of municipal councils naturally found themselves in the spotlight, and took the blame in the late 1930s for the

reduction in Commonwealth financial assistance. As a result, the state government announced a Royal Commission to investigate how the existing municipal system could be reformed.

In the late nineteenth century the proposal to federate the then separate colonies of Australia promised great benefits, especially in the areas of defence and trade. While much time was spent during the Federal conventions of the 1880s and 1890s allocating the various powers of the Commonwealth and new states and ensuring a workable system of Commonwealth government, the issue of Federal taxation and Commonwealth-state financial relations was a major concern of the representatives of the smaller colonies of Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. These colonies were not only less wealthy and less populous than those colonies on the Eastern seaboard but heavily relied on customs and excise duties for government expenditure, a source of revenue which the Federal government now appropriated.¹ With fears that Federation would mean bankruptcy for these smaller colonies, their delegates sought to ensure that a proportion of the surplus revenue derived by the Commonwealth from custom duties would be redistributed back to the states.²

The result, due in part to the influence of Tasmanian delegates, particularly Edward Braddon, was the inclusion of section 87 and 96 into the new constitution, which would quickly define the first 'book-keeping' period of Commonwealth-state relations. Section 87 meant that for the first decade of Federation the Commonwealth could spend only one fourth of its customs revenue with the rest being redistributed among the states. Section 96 enabled the Commonwealth parliament to grant financial assistance to any state on

¹ See R. J. May, *Financing the Small States in Australian Federalism*, (Melbourne, 1971) pp. 1-2.

² J. A. La Nauze, *The Making of the Australian Constitution*, (Melbourne, 1972) pp. 211-5.

such terms and conditions as it thought fit. While these were important concessions granted to gather support for Federation in the smaller colonies and provide a smooth transition for them into a Federal system, overall the sources of revenue were allocated in such a way to put the Commonwealth in a dominant position in its relationship with the new states.³ As Alfred Deakin noted later, 'the rights of self-government of the states has been fondly supposed to be safeguarded by the constitution. It left them legally free, but financially bound to the chariot wheels of the central government. Their need will be its opportunity'.⁴

The first twenty years of Tasmania's experience with Federation confirmed Deakin's prediction. Commonwealth financial powers expanded and grew stronger, firstly by the alteration from the book-keeping system to per capita grants around 1910, and secondly with the need of the Commonwealth to obtain large amounts of money for the war effort.⁵ While the Commonwealth purse got larger and the Federal government's control over it increased, Tasmania steadily found herself needing more financial assistance to arrest her post-federation economic blues. The book-keeping system⁶ was supposed to supply Tasmania with an adequate revenue in the early years of Federation, but the state government continually complained that due to 'custom's leakage' it was not receiving its fair share of surplus revenue from the Commonwealth.⁷ This led to financial problems

³ R. C. Mills, 'The Financial relationship of the Commonwealth and the States', in G. V. Portus (ed.), *Studies in Australian Constitution*, (Sydney 1933) p77.

⁴ as quoted in J. McMillan, G. Evans, and H. Storey, *Australia's Constitution: time for change?*, (Sydney 1983) pp. 104-5.

⁵ see G. Greenwood, *The Future of Australian Federation: a commentary of the working of the constitution*, (Melbourne, 1946) chapter V.

⁶ see W. H. Moore, *The Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia*, (Melbourne 1910) chapter 3.

⁷ see D. I. Wright, 'Tasmania and the Customs Leakage 1901-1913', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings* (THRAPP), vol. 16(4) 1969 pp. 124-131; R. J. May, 'The Politics of Federalism: financial relations between Tasmania and the Commonwealth 1901-1933', *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 14(3) 1968 pp. 375-6; D. I. Wright, 'The Politics of Federal Finance: the first decade', *Historical Studies*, vol. 13 1969 p460.

and a Royal Commission was held in 1910/11 which confirmed Tasmanian losses under Federation and proposed a long term unconditional grant of £500,000 to be paid over ten years.⁸ While Tasmania pushed for the change to per capita grants,⁹ a system which remained till 1927, it seemed to work against the state as it received less money per head of population than under the book-keeping system.¹⁰

The end of the war brought economic depression and a deteriorating financial position for the state government. The Treasurer Neil Elliott Lewis in 1920 outlined what the island battled against – shipping strikes, increased imports, dearth of supply of efficient labour, increasing rates of interest, adverse rates of exchange, restrictions on borrowing, difficulties in obtaining machinery and cement, and a long dry season.¹¹ The poor economic situation of the state meant that finance was a prominent issue (making and breaking governments) in the early 1920s, and that the government had to go cap in hand to the Commonwealth and ask for increased financial assistance. Against a background of secession movements and various state rights leagues throughout the decade, the government of J. A. Lyons earnestly tried to solve the island's economic woes.¹² He commissioned a memo to the Commonwealth government establishing the grounds why Tasmania was entitled to a special grant. These were that the claims made by the Commonwealth from the state of Tasmania had been greater in proportion to that from the larger states, and that owing to a variety of conditions Tasmania was unable to

⁸ May, 'The Politics of Federalism', p377.

⁹ *ibid.*, p376.

¹⁰ 'Economic Case for Tasmania Committee – financial relations of the Commonwealth and States of Australia 1935', *Tasmania: Journal and Printed Papers of Parliament*, JPPP(Tas) 1935, paper no. 4 p17.

¹¹ 'Financial Statement by Treasurer N.E. Lewis', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1920-21, paper no. 36 p3.

¹² see P. R. Hart, 'J. A. Lyons, Tasmanian Labour Leader', *Labour History*, Vol. 9 1965 pp. 33-42; M. Denholm, 'The Lyons Tasmanian Labour Government 1923-1928', *THRAPP*, 24(2) 1977 pp. 45-65; May, 'The Politics of Federalism', p380-1.

recover rapidly from depressed economic conditions.¹³ Far from the state's financial difficulties arising from extravagance in expenditure or leniency in taxation, it struggled because it did not derive from the Commonwealth a benefit in any way commensurate with its contributions to Federal revenue.¹⁴ Where the state previously had been given £84,000 a year, Lyons asked for £200,000 per year for ten years and the return from taxes levied on Tasmania lotteries that were estimated to be worth £110,000 per year.¹⁵ The Commonwealth was unprepared to grant such sums unless the state could show it could be more fiscally responsible, and instead a considerably smaller grant per year was given.¹⁶

This set the pattern for Commonwealth-Tasmanian financial relations for the next decade. The state government continually minimized its own responsibility for the island's plight and attributed its woes to Federation and the various policies of the Federal government. In this case the application for special grants was not charity but a just entitlement. The Commonwealth for its part gave considerably less than what Tasmania continually asked for, and began to stress the agency of the state government in turning around the fortunes of the island. Utilizing its financial clout, it was beginning to encourage reform in Tasmania through the use of conditional grants, something bitterly resented by the state government.

In 1925 the Commonwealth appointed a Royal Commission to investigate Western Australia's disabilities under Federation, and Lyons asked for a similar commission to

¹³ 'Memo Special Consideration from the Parliament of the Commonwealth', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1923-24, paper no.74 p3.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p8.

¹⁵ May, 'The Politics of Federalism', p379.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

inquire into Tasmania's situation. In anticipation of this a report was produced outlining the state's problem, working again under the premise that Federation was the main cause of the island's ills.¹⁷ The report pointed to three features of Federal policy that harmed Tasmania. These were the *Navigation Act* which increased shipping costs and harmed interstate trade;¹⁸ the Federal arbitration court which it contended ignored the special conditions of Tasmanian industry and differences in capacity to wages;¹⁹ and the Federal tariff which resulted in Tasmanian traders losing out to bigger mainland interests through the mechanism of interstate free trade.²⁰ It concluded that unless changes were made 'Federation must be an incomplete success with certain flourishing and prosperous states dragging their harassed sisters at their heels'.²¹

Before the report was completed, the Commonwealth announced it would appoint the investigator Sir Nicholas Lockyer to inquire into Tasmania's difficulties under Federation.²² Another report was produced for Lockyer, built on much of the argument of the above report, and explicitly stated that 'main causes external to Tasmania itself' had contributed to the need for financial assistance.²³ By now the state had an estimated deficit of £1,660,000, a 'total sum which is appalling' noted the report,²⁴ and the state government asked for £545,000 per year for ten years in financial assistance.²⁵ While sympathetic to Tasmania's plight and acknowledging that it had been adversely affected

¹⁷ 'Report of Committee Appointed to Inquire into Tasmania Disabilities under Federation', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1925-26, paper no.8, p5.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p7.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*, p8.

²¹ *ibid.*, p10.

²² May, 'The Politics of Federalism', p382.

²³ 'The Case for Tasmania (presented to Lockyer)', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1925-26, paper no. 52, p6.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p6.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p19.

by Federation, Lockyer noted the state had played some part in contributing to its unsatisfactory financial position.²⁶ He remarked that the future prosperity of Tasmania 'largely depends upon a thorough reform of its financial administration, and that in the absence of such reform no assistance from the Commonwealth is likely to materially aid its progress'.²⁷

Rejecting the amount wanted by the state government, Lockyer was still financially generous in his recommendations. However, most importantly, the money was to be given with strings attached, a subtle 'carrot and stick' approach to inducing administrative reform on the island. For instance, a large loan was to be given for the purpose of developing agricultural and horticultural resources of the state by scientific research; a special grant of £300,000 conditional on reducing certain state taxes, and a loan to relieve the state for the capital cost of the hydro-electric scheme.²⁸ Reaction to the report in Tasmania was mixed, with Lyons remarking it reduced Tasmania to the position of the state vassal to the Commonwealth.²⁹ The Federal government for its part took little notice of Lockyer's recommendations.³⁰

Instead it was more concerned generally with reforming Commonwealth-state financial relations. After much discussion a new financial agreement was reached in 1927. It provided for the Commonwealth taking over public debts of the states, for the payment of an annual fixed grant as a contribution to interest on state debt, and the establishment of a loan council. The existing per capita system was to be abolished.³¹ While the agreement

²⁶ 'Report on Financial Position of Tasmania as affected by Federation', *Commonwealth of Australia: Parliamentary Papers* (CPP), 1926-28, Vol. V, paper no. 24, p5.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*, p25.

²⁹ see May, 'The Politics of Federalism', p382-3.

³⁰ May, *Financing the Small States in Australian Federalism*, p13.

³¹ *ibid.*, p14.

aimed to place Commonwealth-state financial relations on a firmer footing and secure the co-ordination of government borrowing, it tightened the Commonwealth's grip over the fiscal policy of the states.³²

Therefore by the mid-1920s the Commonwealth was broadening its financial powers over the states, and, beginning to reject the view that Federation was solely to blame for all economic ills, that the states themselves should be more active in lifting themselves out of the doldrums. This was made explicit with the 1926 Premier's Conference when the Commonwealth told the states it could no longer 'assume responsibility for the varying degrees of prosperity and development of the several states arising from their geographical position' and that in the future the mere granting of money superficially to solve their problems would stop.³³ This was confirmed in a report outlining the new terms of the Financial Agreement of 1927:

It is necessary in the first place to lay down the general principle that the mere fact that a particular state has a deficit or indeed a series of deficits for a number of years is not in itself a sufficient ground for grant Federal assistance. If the contrary principle were admitted, it would be an invitation to a system of reckless and irresponsible finance.... The mere granting of money far from removing the cause of trouble, may in fact increase them. The true principle, therefore, is to discover the causes of the financial difficulties and to seek to provide means for their removal.³⁴

The onus would now be on state governments to scrutinize their existing practices carefully and make improvements before seeking Commonwealth assistance. Given the perilous financial situation of the state, the government of Tasmania did make several

³² see Greenwood, *The Future of Australian Federation*, p80-81; N. Cowper, 'The First Financial Agreement: its effect upon the relations between the Commonwealth and the states', *Economic Record*, VIII Dec. 1932 pp. 173-190.

³³ see 'Development and Migration Commission Report May 1927', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1927-28, paper no. 8 p2

³⁴ 'Financial Relations Between the States and the Commonwealth: report of debates', *CPP*, 1926-28, vol. V paper no. 28 p20.

attempts at substantial municipal reform in the early 1920s. In late 1920 the Minister for Lands and Works J. B. Hayes suggested that there should be a re-definition of boundaries with a view to decreasing the number of municipalities and improving their administration.³⁵ The municipal councils themselves hardly embraced the idea with much enthusiasm, especially in the North of the state, and municipal association president W. H. Dixon admitted that the opposition contained a good deal of parochialism.³⁶

In the Mersey district the proposal was opposed by the Leven, Kentish and Latrobe councils, the latter especially not wanting to be relegated to a suburb or ward of a Devonport controlled municipality.³⁷ The Devonport council was more open-minded to the suggestion, though amalgamation should happen in other areas than the North West, and passed a motion that numbers of municipalities should be reduced where practical.³⁸ The proposal was more formally put to the municipal conference in November 1920 where it was met with disapproval. The conference agreed that amalgamation would tend towards unfavorable centralization instead of localization and thus was against the general principles of municipal government, where local matters should be the object of distinctly local control.³⁹

The matter rested until 1924, when a new Minister of Lands and Works James Belton wrote to the councils expressing alarm at some aspects of their administration. Belton was most concerned that councils were wishing to relinquish some of their

³⁵ *Archives Office of Tasmania* (AOT), Public Works Department: Correspondence with Municipalities Relating to Operations of the Local Government Act, Hayes to all municipalities 18 October 1920, (Ref: PWD 30/4); *North Western Advocate*, 22 October 1920.

³⁶ *North Western Advocate*, 13 October 1920; see also AOT, PWD 30/4, municipalities responses to amalgamation proposals.

³⁷ *North Western Advocate*, 11 October, 14 October 1920.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 11 October, 26 October 1920.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 3 November 1920.

responsibilities to the state government, therefore increasing its financial burdens at a time of fiscal difficulty. He thought councils were under-valuing a portion of their properties within their municipalities and that rates meant for roads were being hoarded for other purposes.⁴⁰ He suggested at the municipal conference in June that municipalities could be 'grouped' in order to cut overheads and bring greater efficiency into council business.⁴¹ The municipal association executive dealt with the issue later on in the year and was sympathetic to the idea of amalgamation, though it thought only those councils with small rating values should be merged with their larger neighbours, and the process of reform should be left in the hands of the councils themselves with as little government interference as possible.⁴² The executive moved a motion to this effect at the municipal conference in 1925, but the principle of amalgamation was opposed and the motion was lost by a large majority.⁴³

If the councils refused to take the initiative, the poor financial situation of the state forced the government's hand. In May 1926 it announced it intended to introduce a bill dealing with municipal reform in the upcoming session of parliament. The *Advocate* favoured amalgamation, albeit not on the North West, but thought the opportunity was ripe elsewhere for change.⁴⁴ The bill was introduced into parliament in July, but serious discussion did not take place until early December. It provided that a commission consisting of three members would be granted power to amalgamate two or more municipalities, define any new boundaries, and apply the new names of municipalities or

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 10 June 1924.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 14 June 1924.

⁴² *ibid.*, 15 October 1924.

⁴³ AOT, Municipal Association of Tasmania: Printed Copies of Minutes, 1925 conference minutes p13, (Ref: CB 52/6).

⁴⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 28 May 1926.

wards within them. Most significantly, their decisions would become law by proclamation without first going through parliament.⁴⁵

This was the major sticking point with the legislation. Some members in the house opposed the bill because the commission's powers would be too autocratic, one suggesting that it made parliament a 'farce'.⁴⁶ Aghast at Belton's admission that ratepayers themselves would have no right to vote in favour or against any new proposed boundaries, an amendment was suggested that the commission's findings be put to parliament before coming into operation. It was rejected, the government wishing to give the commission as free a hand as possible in determining boundaries without political interference. By now there was some press, public and council apprehension about the powers of the commission, and the bill was met with little favour in the Legislative Council.⁴⁷ The Green Ponds municipality told Lyons amalgamation was unnecessary since 'larger municipalities could not be run as efficiently or as economically as the majority of councils are run at present'.⁴⁸ It feared that isolated places and small townships would suffer from the lack of local knowledge that would result from representatives having to cover large areas. The bill was eventually allowed to lapse in the upper chamber.

So municipal reform was on the agenda at this time for the government, and to a lesser extent the municipal councils, but little headway was made towards substantial reform. The attitude of the government was partly to blame for this, though this was a result of

⁴⁵ *Mercury*, 3 December 1926.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 10 December 1926.

⁴⁸ AOT, Premier's Department: General Correspondence files, Amalgamation of Municipalities, Green Ponds Municipality to Premier 25 October 1926, (Ref: PD 1 1926 file no. 73/7)

the intransigence of the councils themselves in not really desiring amalgamation. As we have already seen, a common thread throughout the history of municipal reform in Tasmania is that local bodies strongly desired it to be voluntary and not enforced from 'above', preferring reform to be influenced by those most affected by any proposed change. Local bodies had always strongly protested attempts by the government to impose changes upon them, and the Lyons government again committed this error with its proposal to establish a commission to carve up municipalities without adequate consultation.

The process was hindered also by an absence of any great external pressure which could strongly influence parliament and local bodies that significant reform was needed quickly. When reform was talked about at the turn of the century, the financial consequences of Federation was a constant pressure put on government to seek reform. The financial difficulties of the 1920s, while serious, were different. The state government and a significant portion of the Tasmanian population thought the island's ills were mainly the fault of Federal policy, and only great changes in this area could fix the financial situation of the state. With Commonwealth policy just beginning to change in placing more onus on the state for their economic position, this view mitigated against a concerted campaign to introduce municipal reform. So long as the state was able to blame the Commonwealth for its problems, there was no need for urgent reform in its local administration.

But times were changing. Lyons lost government in mid-1928, and the new Premier John McPhee was quickly informed that Commonwealth grants would be conditional on assisting and carrying out recommendations from a Commonwealth's inquiry into the

state's transport system.⁴⁹ This drew protests from the government.⁵⁰ In 1929 state representatives had meetings with Commonwealth officials and asked for first a grant of £300,000 per year for 5 years and then £460,000 per year for ten years plus considerable money for flood relief. The request were rebuffed by the Prime Minister, Stanley Bruce, unhappy that the state had not complied with some of the recommendations of the development and migration commission, and a grant of £250,000 per year for five years was instead granted.⁵¹

In late 1929 Lyons contested and won a seat in Federal parliament with promises for a full scale enquiry into the state's financial position, and found himself in a Labor cabinet.⁵² With growing economic difficulties nationwide, and a developing secession movement in Tasmania, the Scullin Labor government commissioned a joint committee of public accounts to examine states finances. The Tasmanian government established a committee which produced a report, *The Case for Tasmania 1930*, to put their state's claims. The process was characterized by much political bickering, but eventually the state asked for some £543,000 per year for six years commencing immediately.⁵³ An initial report of the public accounts committee recommended that an extra £250,000 per year on top of the existing £250,000 be granted, along with other money tied to specific projects.⁵⁴ The state government was happy, but the Commonwealth did little to act on the recommendations of this report.⁵⁵ In March 1931 the joint committee re-examined

⁴⁹ 'Development and Migration Commission Report May 1927', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1927-28, paper no. 8 p3.

⁵⁰ May, 'The Politics of Federalism', p385.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*, p386.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p388.

⁵⁴ 'Public Accounts Committee – Finances of Tasmania as affected by Federation', *CPP*, 1929-31, Vol. III, paper no. 238 p6.

⁵⁵ May, 'The Politics of Federalism', p390.

the states' finances under amended terms of reference and concluded that 'in justice to the taxpayers of other states' it could not recommend any additional assistance above the £250,000 the state already received.⁵⁶

In 1931 Lyons defected from the Labor Party, assumed the leadership of the non-labour coalition, and became Prime Minister. The Tasmanian government, seeing its chance, pressed for increased financial assistance. While it requested £250,000 and then £190,000 Lyons was only prepared to offer £50,000.⁵⁷ He did, however, enact other changes which were beneficial to Tasmania.⁵⁸ By this time Western Australia and South Australia were receiving regular financial assistance from the Commonwealth, distributed from various *ad-hoc* bodies without firm principles on how the grant was determined.⁵⁹ The traditional view prevailed that Commonwealth payments to the states should be related to the financial sacrifice brought by Federation to a state.⁶⁰ While this satisfied the states, the Commonwealth from the 1920s as we have seen was developing a strong attitude against granting unconditional sums of money to the states. It was thought to induce financial irresponsibility and encourage the detrimental practice of one authority spending the revenue raised by another authority.⁶¹

As the depression took hold in Australia, L. F. Giblin, a Tasmanian statistician who had worked closely with Lyons when he had been Premier of Tasmania, suggested in 1930 that authority for special grants be taken off *ad-hoc* bodies and placed under the control of one body, so that uniformity could be achieved and the principles of determining

⁵⁶ 'Public Accounts Committee – Finances of Tasmania as affected by Federation', *CPP*, 1929-31, Vol. III, paper no. 238 p16.

⁵⁷ May, 'The Politics of Federalism', p390.

⁵⁸ see *ibid.*, p391.

⁵⁹ J. A. Maxwell, *Commonwealth-State Financial Relations in Australia*, (Melbourne, 1967) p22.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p1.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p20.

grants classified.⁶² This arose around the same time as calls for the inter-state commission provided by section 97 to be revived and so was met with favor by the states. A Royal Commission into the finances of South Australia and the *Case for Tasmania 1930* both suggested that such a body should be formed.⁶³ By early 1932 Tasmania had formally suggested the proposal to Lyons, who with Giblin, now Acting Commonwealth Statistician, formulated plans for a permanent commission continuously to study financial relations within the Federation and to deal with special grants. With growing economic difficulties and secession movements in Western Australia and Tasmania, a bill establishing the Commonwealth Grants Commission was introduced and passed in May 1933.⁶⁴

Despite pushing for such a body, opinion in the claimant states was initially unfavourable towards the commission, particularly in the appointment of its members F. W. Eggleston, Giblin and J. W. Sandford.⁶⁵ In its first report the commission defined its task as bringing justice to particular states by the means of special grants as provided by section 96 of the constitution, but stressed that it was 'essential for healthy relations between the Commonwealth and the states that the power to make grants under that section should be exercised on definite and sound principles'.⁶⁶ The commission set out in its early reports to define and administer these principles. It was expected that the commission would follow the existing tradition of examining the affect that Federation

⁶² *ibid.*, p22-3.

⁶³ May, *Financing the Small States in Australian Federalism*, p33.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p36; for an overview of the Grants Commission see E. J. Hanson, 'Federal-State relations in Australia', *Canadian Public Administration*, vol. 5(1) 1962 pp. 9-22; and Australian Commonwealth Grants Commission, *Equality in Diversity: history of the Commonwealth Grants Commission*, (Canberra 1995)

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p39.

⁶⁶ Commonwealth Grants Commission report 1934, *CPP*, 1932-34, IV, paper no. 218 p10.

had on the finances of the small states in order to determine grants. In its first report the commission rejected the idea of compensation for Federal disabilities as a basis for the measurement of special grants, and adopted a method of assessment based on fiscal needs relative to certain standards of expenditure and revenue raising.⁶⁷ This arose from the difficulty of exactly measuring a states' disability from Federation or a Federal policy in monetary terms, but also because 'so long as a state is a member of Federation it should be possible for its government to function with reasonable efficiency at a standard not much inferior to that of the other states'.⁶⁸

The commission dubbed its new term of reference the 'operative principle', and their report was met with hostility in the claimant states, despite receiving grants from the commission larger than those obtained previously.⁶⁹ The operative principle was firmly put in the commissioner's second report a year later:

The commission took the view that a state seeking financial assistance from the Commonwealth should be able to show that it had made special efforts to meet its own difficult position. Thus a claimant state was expected to show that it was making a more than average effort, that it was submitting to somewhat heavier taxation and to a scale of social services, if anything, below the average, and that it was exercising strict economy generally in the administration of the services of the state.⁷⁰

After the third report of the commission in 1936 most states accepted the commission's principle and method in determining grants.⁷¹ While no strings were attached to these grants, claimant states were expected to eventually adhere to the rigorous standards

⁶⁷ May, *Financing the Small States in Australian Federalism*, p59.

⁶⁸ Commonwealth Grants Commission report 1934, *CPP*, 1932-34, IV, paper no. 218 p123.

⁶⁹ May, *Financing the Small States in Australian Federalism*, p60.

⁷⁰ Commonwealth Grants Commission 2nd report, *CPP*, 1934-7, IV paper no. 148 p12.

⁷¹ May, *Financing the Small States in Australian Federalism*, p62-3; *Mercury*, 27 July 1936.

proclaimed by the commission or risk reduction in their grant.⁷² Therefore the Grants Commission came to exercise significant control over states wanting financial assistance. It shifted the responsibility for a state's plight from Federal policy to the states' themselves, making them more accountable for their own efforts to arrest their poor financial performance. In its early reports the commission was sympathetic to Tasmania's plight. In its second report it noted the main difficulty of the state comes from its 'poverty of resources and small area of good land', and that a considerable proportion of the island was still undeveloped and uninhabited.⁷³ The state had also allowed her assets to run down, particularly her railways, depleted her forests, and suffered from soil exhaustion. It therefore concluded 'Tasmania is thus a state of poor resources; she benefits from the Federal connexion, but the strain of keeping up to the industrial and social standards of the rest of the Commonwealth imposes a heavy burden upon her'.⁷⁴ The third report added that the state suffered from low productivity compared to other states and that unproductive loan expenditure resulted in the 'crushing effect of public debt losses on the budget of the state'.⁷⁵

As the commission grew more sophisticated in its analysis of economic problems of claimant states and the method of determining grants, it began to uncover ways in which changes in the states' administration could improve its financial prospects. In its second report the commission first noted that local government taxation was markedly lower in the claimant states compared to their non-claimants counterparts:

⁷² Maxwell, *Commonwealth-State Financial Relations in Australia*, p25.

⁷³ Commonwealth Grants Commission 2nd report, *CPP*, 1934-7, IV paper no. 148 p81

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p82.

⁷⁵ Commonwealth Grants Commission 3rd report, *CPP*, 1934-37, IV, paper no. 254 p42.

Table 6.1: Local Government Taxation, per head of population (s d)

	NSW.	Vic	Qld.	S.A.	W.A.	Tas.
1931-2	46 11	41 0	54 0	28 2	28 5	27 3
1932-3	43 11	39 9	51 7	28 0	31 9	30 2
1933-4	43 9	40 3	50 3	29 0	30 0	27 4 ⁷⁶

Local government taxation was soon factored into the measurement of a state's taxable capacity, a criteria used by the commission to create a general standard and comparison of the state's effort in raising revenue to meet its expenditure. In its fourth report in 1937 the commission pointed out that local government taxation in claimant states was so low, because the government in those states raised loans and bore much of the interest burdens that were devolved onto local bodies in non-claimant states.⁷⁷ As early as 1926 Lockyer had alluded to this practice and the problems it created. He noted that 'apart from the undesirable feature of the state accepting financial responsibility in matters with which it was not directly concerned, the practice has not only led to larger expenditure by public bodies than otherwise would have been the case, but it has tended to encourage the feeling that the parental indulgence of the state may be relied upon when the due date for payment of interest and other obligations calls for settlement'.⁷⁸

Lockyer's remedy was that such loans were to cease, and local authorities be made solely responsible for arranging their own financial requirements and held directly liable for their own indebtedness.⁷⁹ The commission in its fifth report in 1938 had much the same view. In analysing the state's public debt it concluded that a 'fundamental reorganization of Tasmanian administration is required' with the state suffering from low rates of

⁷⁶ Commonwealth Grants Commission 1st report p95, 2nd report p71, 3rd report pl 14.

⁷⁷ Commonwealth Grants Commission 4th report, *CPP*, 1937, V, paper no. 75 p59.

⁷⁸ 'Report on Financial Position of Tasmania as affected by Federation, by Sir N. Lockyer', *CPP*, 1926-28, Vol. V, paper no. 24 p9-10.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p10.

income and motor tax, as well as local government rates much lower than in other states.⁸⁰ An island of some 10,000 sq. miles with 49 municipalities and a number of marine boards operating on limited revenue naturally meant the municipalities relied on the state to provide services borne elsewhere in Australia by the property owner. As a result the financial position of the state government was worse than it should be. The commission then concluded that a reorganization of the local government system in Tasmania 'seems to us to be urgent'.⁸¹

From the mid-1930s the economic fortunes of Tasmania were beginning to improve and consequently the Grants Commission reduced the grant given to the state, much to the annoyance of the Labor government that came to power in June 1934. The state still battled against chronic unemployment and poor social services, and needed money to fund extensive public work schemes.⁸² The Labor leader, A. G. Ogilvie, had been a long-term advocate of municipal reform and as leader of the opposition in the early 1930s had suggested that many of the municipal councils in the state could be abolished on the grounds of economy.⁸³ Within its first few months of government the new Minister of Lands T. H. Davies told Auditor-General E. H. Pretyman that he intended to watch municipal councils very closely.⁸⁴ The debts owing to municipalities around the state had increased from £67,710 in June 1929 to £88,327 by June 1933, with the average percentage of rates outstanding increasing from 19% to 34%.⁸⁵ Pretyman told new

⁸⁰ Commonwealth Grants Commission, 5th report, *CPP*, 1937-40, IV, paper no. 90 p80.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p81; for Commonwealth Grants Commission relationship with local government after 1945, see R. Else-Mitchell, 'The Grants Commission and Local Government', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 34(4) 1975 pp. 269-280.

⁸² W. A. Townsley, *Tasmania from Colony to Statehood 1803-1945*, (Hobart 1991) p367.

⁸³ *North Western Advocate*, 23 April 1931.

⁸⁴ *AOT*, PWD 30/6, Pretyman to Dwyer-Gray 5 October 1934, p1.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p2.

Treasurer Dwyer-Gray that municipal councils had become mere advisors to most local projects which were often funded by the state government and had 'all the advantages of local government without local financial responsibility'.⁸⁶

In difficult economic times this was unacceptable to the Labor government, and in his budget speech of 1934 Dwyer-Gray made this clear. If it was necessary to maintain a review of the respective functions and spheres of finance of the Federal and state government in these times he argued, then 'it was equally clear that serious consideration should also be given...to an adequate review of the distribution of functions and financial responsibilities between the state and local authorities in Tasmania'.⁸⁷ Ogilvie was similarly unimpressed, and was an unsympathetic critic of local authorities as they began to experience financial and administrative trouble. In June 1936 he told a deputation from the Municipal Association that the condition of many roads around the state was a disgrace, and blamed councils for the phenomenon of what he called 'political roads', those which had been built on the urging of local members of parliament but now lay unused and a burden on the public treasury.⁸⁸ In a memo to his ministers in September he announced that no further loans to municipal bodies would be granted without their finances being rigorously checked by the Auditor-General and without adequate justification.⁸⁹ Labor would encourage councils to become more fiscally responsible and accountable. This was more formally outlined by Dwyer-Gray in his budget speech of 1936, saying the tendency of local authorities in the state to be relieved of loan charges

⁸⁶ *ibid*, p3.

⁸⁷ *Mercury*, 24 October 1934.

⁸⁸ *ibid*, 12 June 1936.

⁸⁹ AOT, Premier's Department: General Correspondence files, Request from Local Bodies for Assistance file, cabinet memo from A. G. Ogilvie 25 September 1936, (Ref: PD 1 1936 file no. 73/13).

on public works would have to end. 'I see no good reason why we should not frankly review the evolution of the practice which has grown up in this state and put us out of line in this respect with other states' he continued, and charge local bodies with enjoying the advantages of local government without financial responsibility, the reason why so many of them were in the mess they were in.⁹⁰

A good system of local government would have to encourage real responsibility, and this was impossible without a degree of local burden imposed on councils for public works carried out in their district. He concluded whether 'we have gone to extremes in this state, and centralized functions to the point of reducing local government to a shadow, with a consequent need for consolidation among such bodies, or alternatively, a revision to a more balanced allocation of functions and financial responsibilities'.⁹¹ In any case, a review was needed.

Like the Lyons government in the 1920s, the Ogilvie government in the mid-1930s recognized the need for municipal reform, but it lacked a reason, like Federation, big enough to create an impetus towards significant change. The shift in emphasis from the Commonwealth in its relationship with the states was the impetus needed. Tasmania could no longer solely blame Federation for its ills and expect compensation, money from the Commonwealth would only be forthcoming from positive efforts made by the government to arrest their economic difficulties. The Prime Minister J. A. Lyons made this clear in 1935, noting 'that the state has a direct responsibility to its people, and that to endeavour to foist that responsibility upon the Commonwealth on every occasion is

⁹⁰ 'Financial Statement of Treasurer of Tasmania 1936-7', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1936, paper no. 23 p19-20.

⁹¹ *ibid*, p21.

practically immoral and economically dangerous. It must, in the end, result in the loss of state sovereignty'.⁹²

Still relying on Commonwealth funds, the reduction of its grant by the Grants Commission came as a blow. In acknowledging the problems of local government as one reason for a reduction of its grant, the Grants Commission gave the government its reason to push for significant reform. Dwyer-Gray announced that Tasmania had lost money in grants because of a below-par severity of taxation score compared to other states, due primarily to low municipal rating.⁹³ The state had been subsequently penalized by the Grants Commission because of its lowness of municipal rating and Dwyer-Gray hinted that a select committee or Royal Commission would be appointed to investigate the question of municipal and state functional and financial relationships.⁹⁴

This was affirmed in his 1938 financial statement. It was 'no question' that the low local rating in Tasmania had seriously affected the state's special grant, nor that a large extent of functions delegated to the municipalities under the *Local Government Act* 1906 were being either carried out or substantially financed by the state. The government had been left in a position where it 'cannot possibly afford to continue altogether unaltered a system seriously and legitimately questioned by the Grants Commission' and imposes a double burden on the state treasury through the loss of grants and expenditure involved in paying off municipal debt.⁹⁵ Unwilling to raise income and other taxes which would discourage industry, a Royal Commission into the municipal system was the only option.

⁹² *Mercury*, 21 January 1935; see also a similar statement made in Devonport *ibid.*, 21 October 1935.

⁹³ *North Western Advocate*, 9 July 1938.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ 'Financial Statement of the Treasurer of Tasmania', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1938, paper no. 18 p42.

The main direction of the enquiry would be in the direction of amalgamation, and Dwyer-Gray concluded:

The present machinery of municipal government was probably modeled on the English plan, where the functions are extremely wide in scope, including education, police and charity, which absorb half of the rate revenue, whereas such function are carried out here by the central government. It must be apparent to everyone that the smallness of many municipal units is wasteful of the ratepayers money, and than an enquiry should be set on foot to ascertain the degree of consolidation that should be brought about to effect a much needed reform.⁹⁶

In conclusion, two important points must be noted about the process that led to the announcement of a Royal Commission to investigate the municipal system in Tasmania. The first is how financial pressures on the state government led to it seeking reform in the local sphere. Essentially, the lessons learned from Commonwealth-state relations about fiscal responsibility were subsequently applied to the local government sphere, which had been progressively handing over financial responsibility to the state government for some of its duties. The principle that one level of government should not raise and then relinquish funds for another level of government to spend was being rigorously applied across the board.

Secondly, the failure of the Lyons government's effort to enact change, together with the debate over the *Statutory Authorities Administration Act*, reinforces the point that local bodies in Tasmania would never be bullied by the state government into change. They always stressed that any reform would have to be voluntary and in consultation with those who were to be affected by change. However, their conservative nature made them skeptical of reform, so an anxious state government needing reform was always moved to

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p45.

compromise with them. In 1904, this had been done in a rather limited way through conferences, and in 1939 it was to be achieved through a Royal Commission.

UTAS

Chapter 7: 1939 Royal Commission into Local Government

The last two chapters have broadly outlined the situation existing in Tasmania throughout the 1920s and 1930s that eventually led to a Royal Commission into the island's municipal system in 1939. After the war, municipal councils began having trouble with rising overheads and lower revenues, leading some into serious financial difficulty by the 1930s. The revolution in motor-driven transport in the 1920s also came to have serious repercussions for the councils in the 1930s, with most unable adequately to meet their obligations in regard to road maintenance. The period after war was also a difficult time for the state government, who struggled with the poor economic circumstances of the state and increasingly had to ask for financial assistance from the Commonwealth to survive. Where federal money was handed over unconditionally in the 1920s, the establishment of the Commonwealth Grants Commission was the beginning of a new fiscal relationship between the Commonwealth and the states. Greater responsibility was put on the states to make changes that would aid economic development. Improving municipal administration was one such change, and after failed attempts at reform in the 1920s, the poor performance of councils in the 1930s led to a Royal Commission being proposed to suggest alterations in the Tasmanian municipal system.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the proceedings and outcome of this Royal Commission appointed by the Ogilvie government in 1938. It will argue that, while municipal councils were receptive to some reforms, they were antagonistic to the major focus of the Royal Commission – the amalgamation of some municipalities. Faced with such an attitude, the Royal Commission produced a safe report, with some important

administrative changes and the barest of amalgamations it thought could be reasonably enacted. But, as at the turn of the century and in the 1920s, the idea of amalgamation and comprehensive municipal reform was met with strident municipal opposition and an obstinate Legislative Council. The result was a compromise between the state government and municipal bodies and reform far below that planned initially by the Ogilvie government.

The Royal Commission

In announcing that shortly a Royal Commission would be created to inquire into the affairs of local government, the Premier A. G. Ogilvie in early November 1938 remarked that the terms of reference for the commissioners would be 'wide in their scope'.¹ They were subsequently asked to inquire into and report upon:

1) the administration and finances of municipal government, both city and rural, in this state, and of the various Acts relating thereto; and in particular the administration of the *Local Government Act* 1906.

2) The basis of valuation and assessment of land and property, the co-ordination of valuations and assessments, and the question of preparing, printing and publishing the same annually or otherwise.

3) The best form of municipal government to meet the requirements of the state.

4) The number of municipal bodies necessary or desirable for the purpose aforesaid, and the form, constitution, powers, jurisdiction, and authority of such bodies.

5) The division of the state into municipalities or other divisions for the purposes aforesaid, and the number, extent, and boundaries thereof best suited for securing efficient and satisfactory municipal government in the state; the system of dividing municipalities into separate wards, either generally or for election purposes.

6) The best system of voting at municipal elections, and, in particular, the question whether the system of plural voting is desirable or whether it should be replaced by some other, and, if so, what system.

7) The best means of securing and coordinating municipal and state government, and, in particular, co-ordination in the carrying out of municipal public works and state public works.

8) All other matters and things incidental thereto or connected therewith.²

¹ *Mercury*, 2 November 1938.

² *North Western Advocate*, 3 November 1938.

The commission was comprised of G. D. Balsille the director of public works in the state; Donald McLennan the chairman of the Scottsdale commission; L. T. Barwick the warden of Port Cygnet; and B. E. Saunders a retired accountant from Hobart.³ The *Mercury* was pleased with their terms of reference, regarding them as comprehensive and broad enough to enable a complete and searching investigation.⁴ The *Advocate* was more wary, regretting the commission was not more representative of the state as a whole, as one member resided in the North East and the rest in the South. It did think, however, that improvement of the municipal system could be brought about without making drastic amendments to the system, and without abolishing it in favour of another.⁵

After some preliminary meetings the commission took its first evidence in early December 1938. The first important witness it heard was public works engineer A. W. Knight. He stated that road work carried out by municipal bodies was inefficient and involved a waste of a substantial proportion of available funds. This was particularly the case with country roads, which bore the brunt of motor traffic for which they had not been constructed.⁶ Knight bluntly argued that 'it must be realized that the supervision of road construction and maintenance is now a matter for trained engineers, not laymen. Municipal authorities are quite incompetent to carry out roadwork satisfactory without modern maintenance plant. As these authorities are constituted at present, it is impossible for the great majority to obtain either'.⁷ He suggested the existing 49

³ *ibid.*, 5 November 1938.

⁴ *Mercury*, 3 November 1938.

⁵ *North Western Advocate*, 12 November 1938.

⁶ *Mercury*, 7 December 1938.

⁷ *North Western Advocate*, 7 December 1938; *Archives Office of Tasmania (AOT)*, Royal Commission into Local Government 1939: Miscellaneous statements of evidence, evidence submitted by A. W. Knight pp. 13-14 (Ref: RC 19/3)

municipalities be grouped into 12 municipal districts, with headquarters at Glenorchy, Wynyard, Burnie, Ulverstone, Devonport, Deloraine, Scottsdale, Campbell Town, Bothwell, Sorell, Huonville, and Queenstown.⁸ In the North West for instance, this meant that a new Leven municipal district would comprise the old Leven, Penguin and Kentish municipalities; and a Circular Head municipal district would comprise the old Circular Head, King Island, Table Cape, Wynyard and Waratah municipalities. Devonport and Burnie would remain the same.⁹ The bigger municipal districts would be able to pool their resources to obtain qualified engineers and plant equipment, and more efficiently and effectively organize and carry out road maintenance.

Another important early witness was H. C. Tapping, the Commissioner for Taxes. He pointed out that municipalities often took no action to have corrected any values shown in land valuation rolls, with the result that corrections to capital values were made only when they were occasioned by sales or requests for revaluation. The want of co-operation with state government authorities in ensuring up-to-date rolls was largely responsible for the poor financial position in which many municipalities found themselves. He therefore made several recommendations: that capital value be retained as the basis of local government district assessments; that there be one roll, to be used for all purposes, and to show the annual value; that the annual value be adjusted yearly on all alterations published in the yearly supplement; and that a valuation board be set up to oversee valuations that were to be used for all purposes – land tax, municipal rating, probate values and agricultural tax.¹⁰

⁸ *Mercury*, 7 December 1938.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

The other important witness the commission heard in early December 1938 was F. J. Batt, the Auditor-General. He saw the need for substantial change in the municipal system, telling the commission that the conditions ‘applicable in 1906 when the *Local Government Act* first became law no longer exist’, and seeing it as natural that larger municipalities should come into existence.¹¹ Batt gave detailed evidence under the eight terms of reference guiding the Royal Commission. Regarding the administrative and financial aspects of the existing councils, he recommended that a proper budgeting system of preparing an estimate of the receipts and expenditure for the forthcoming year and then strictly adhering to it was essential for financial stability.¹² He criticized the way councils often did not devote enough time and care in compiling assessment rolls. Along with an increased minimum rate of annual value, Batt agreed with Tapping that a joint roll was needed for all taxation purposes and this was best left in the hands of the state government.¹³

As for the best form of municipal government for the island, Batt was cautious about automatically endorsing the prevailing system of elected councils. State-appointed commissions had been ‘very satisfactory’ and improved the execution of municipal business, and so Batt was wary of reducing any of the powers given to the government under the *Statutory Authorities Administration Act*.¹⁴ In any case, he thought that 49 corporations and municipalities in the state with some 516 members was too unwieldy for efficient local administration. The amalgamation of some municipalities ‘seems

¹¹ *North Western Advocate*, 9 December 1938.

¹² ‘Auditor-General’s report 1939’, *Tasmania: Journals and Printed Papers of Parliament*, JPPP(Tas), 1939 paper no. 10 p134.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p136.

desirable and practicable'.¹⁵ He offered several reasons for this: the inability of councils to maintain roads to meet present day conditions without financial assistance from the state; the purchase of road-making plant was beyond the means of some councils; for smaller municipalities their revenue was eaten up by a large percentage of administration expenses; and improved means of transport had made some small municipalities unnecessary.¹⁶

Batt proposed dividing the state into 18 municipalities, with each council to be comprised of only 9 members. In the North West this meant merging the Table Cape, Waratah and Circular Head municipalities into one, and combining Burnie and Penguin, Leven and Kentish, and Devonport and Latrobe.¹⁷ With each new council having 9 members, Batt suggested reforming the ward system, as though it had been useful in the past, it was now 'no longer necessary or desirable'.¹⁸ It had proved to be rather unsatisfactory as a means of ensuring that all parts of the municipality were equally attended to, due to shifts in populations and annual value often causing discrepancies in the allocation of municipal funds. Batt suggested scrapping the ward system and replacing it with a more thorough use of committees to assess what was best for the whole municipality after a due regard for local interests.¹⁹

As with the ward system, he also thought plural voting had once served a useful role in municipal affairs but was now obsolete. Abolishing it would not significantly alter the selection of candidates, and may act as an impetus for ratepayers to take a greater interest

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p137.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *North Western Advocate*, 9 December 1938.

¹⁸ 'Auditor-General's report 1939', p143.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p141.

in recording their votes and seeing that the affairs of their municipality were properly administered.²⁰ Batt's last suggestion was the creation of a local government board to foster greater co-operation and co-ordination of services between the state and municipal spheres. The board he envisaged would consist of an representative from the municipalities, the government, and the public works department.²¹

The testimony from Knight, Tapping and Batt provided the broad framework for the commission, and their views on amalgamation, road maintenance, ward and voting reform and means of assessment gave the municipalities something concrete to argue for and against. Generally speaking, there was a broad consensus amongst the municipalities around the state as to the changes needed in the municipal system. Most thought that little change at all was needed, and often submitted their evidence to the commission with the preface that they discharged their duties with as much economy and efficiency as possible.²²

Most, if not all, councils favoured a joint municipal-government roll that could be used for the purposes of assessment, the abolition of the ward system except for the election of councillors, and the retention of plural voting. In regards to the latter, the Municipal Association of Tasmania thought plural voting was 'fair and equitable', and stood firm on the principle that those who paid the rates were entitled to a proportionate voice in their allocation.²³ The councils were also against government proposals to take from municipalities the control of health, rabbit control, weighbridges, and weight and

²⁰ *ibid.*, p144.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² AOT, Royal Commission into Local Government 1939: Statements of Evidence submitted by Municipalities, evidence submitted by J. F. Wright on behalf of the Leven municipality, p1 (Ref: RC 19/2/2)

²³ *North Western Advocate*, 25 February 1939; see also AOT, RC 19/3, evidence submitted by Burnie Chamber of Commerce.

measures and put them in the hands of state departments.²⁴ This stemmed from a fear that it would start a trend in which municipal councils would see all their duties gradually taken away. The Hobart council for instance passed a resolution protesting 'the tendency on the part of the state government to usurp the functions of municipal authorities'.²⁵ Councils were also wary of the group system advocated for the purposes of road maintenance, and tended to take the view that more revenue was needed, not amalgamation, and that greater co-operation was needed between councils and the public works department to ensure road maintenance was carried out efficiently.²⁶

Another issue the councils were united upon was their preference for elected councils over government-appointed commissions. The Leven council insisted that 'no other system would be as satisfactory in a democratic community. Electors of municipalities should have the same privileges as electors of the state. That is, the right to elect those who are to govern them'.²⁷ Those appointed to government-appointed commissions thought otherwise. A member of the Scottsdale commission C. E. Northeast stated that in his experience 'a small commission can give better service to a community than an elected body of councillors as, free from all interference from electors, it can concentrate on the general progress of the community'.²⁸ The chairman of the George Town commission gave a similar testimony on the benefits of not being encumbered by local democracy in conducting municipal business.²⁹

²⁴ see the evidence from the Evandale council, *North Western Advocate*, 26 January 1939, and the Leven council, *ibid.*, 3 February 1939.

²⁵ *Mercury*, 13 December 1938.

²⁶ *North Western Advocate*, 10 January 1939.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 3 February 1939; AOT, RC 19/2/2, evidence submitted by Leven council, p7.

²⁸ *Mercury*, 17 February 1939.

²⁹ *North Western Advocate*, 27 January 1939.

But the most important and controversial issue for the councils was the proposed amalgamation of some municipalities. Most councils opposed the measure, albeit in varying degrees of hostility, though there were some exceptions. One was New Norfolk, whose warden R. G. Shoobridge, M.L.C. for Derwent, told the commission larger municipalities with greater powers were a must in order to strengthen local government in Tasmania. He proposed that the present New Norfolk boundaries be enlarged, taking in the municipality of Brighton, the West ward of Glenorchy, and part of the Hamilton municipality.³⁰ Sorell council was sympathetic towards amalgamation and preferred joining either Clarence or Richmond,³¹ while Campbell Town was not opposed to amalgamation, 'within reason of areas having identical interests and where it could be proved that a saving in overhead costs could be effected without impairing efficiency and service to ratepayers'.³² Another sympathetic council was Devonport. Its warden Edwin Inglelew told the commission that in his personal opinion it was best for either Devonport, Latrobe and Kentish to amalgamate or Devonport to be created as an urban area. 'The difficulties attached to amalgamation' he continued, 'are not insurmountable, provided that protection is given in due proportion to each section of a community that is called upon to pay specific rates for specific purposes'.³³ Inglelew's proposal was not viewed favourably by country councillors of the Don ward, who were strongly against the amalgamation of Devonport with anyone.³⁴

³⁰ *Mercury*, 13 January 1939.

³¹ *ibid.*, 18 January 1939.

³² *ibid.*, 9 February 1939.

³³ AOT, RC 19/2/1, evidence submitted by Edwin Inglelew on behalf of the Devonport municipality, p4.

³⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 2 February 1939.

But New Norfolk, Sorell, Campbell Town, and Devonport were going against a strong current of opinion that viewed amalgamation unfavourably. The Deloraine council put it most dramatically:

There is no doubt that we are at the parting of the ways. There is nothing surer than that if the present suggested amalgamation of municipalities were to take place it would be the end of local government. It would only be a matter of a short period and all the rights and the privileges which the ratepayers at present have of local government self-determination in local matters would be lost.³⁵

The question arises why, when in the preceding chapters we saw the financial difficulties, problems with road maintenance, and pressure put on by the state government, municipal councils were still reluctant to consider amalgamation as a means of solving their problems? The first explanation lies with the conclusion at the end of chapter five. There it was suggested that municipal councils embraced change only when it was clear that a problem existed and clearly needed fixing, and not from matters of principle. In this context, amalgamation was opposed because the municipal councils themselves did not see it as necessary. As a councillor for Green Ponds municipality put it, 'I am not in favour of change for the sake of change. If amalgamation will give better results, let us have it by all means'.³⁶ The Deloraine council added that it thought 'we have an Act and a system that is fair, sound, and equitable, a system which is second to none as far as the requirements of this state is concerned'.³⁷ The fact was most municipal councils were skeptical of the benefits of amalgamation. The Bothwell council thought amalgamation would not effect economies, reduce overhead expenses, or benefit

³⁵ *ibid.*, 1 February 1939, AOT, RC 19/2/1, evidence submitted by Deloraine municipality, p2.

³⁶ *Mercury*, 19 January 1939

³⁷ see AOT, RC 19/2/1, evidence submitted by the Deloraine municipality, p1.

ratepayers.³⁸ The Longford council thought that centralization would lead to a considerable increase in the maintenance of roads,³⁹ while the Oatlands council foresaw that amalgamation 'would be carried out on lines of general efficiency and economy, with a dire regard to the spirit of local government and to the convenience of ratepayers'.⁴⁰

Skepticism towards the benefits of amalgamation played its part in opposition to the measure. Another explanation lies in the municipal councils' attachment to the principle of community of interest. The first three chapters showed how this developed, while the fourth demonstrated that despite the growth of regionalism an attachment to locality still existed by 1939. The idea behind the community of interest principle is that distinctive local 'interests' existed in the state that should be protected by local boundaries, under the control of locals most intimately concerned with such an interest. The third chapter noted also how this tended to be a conservative notion, that it was often used to prevent rather than promote change.

In their evidence to the commission, municipal councils opposed amalgamation because it was felt that it would disrupt the community of interests that existed in the prevailing municipal system. Larger districts would mean less local control, and less local control meant local interests could not be defended or promoted. Amalgamation promised to make a mockery of the term local government. A member of the Evandale council W.J. Hawley told the commission that he 'was not prepared to admit that if money could be

³⁸ *Mercury*, 19 January 1939; see also *AOT*, RC 19/2/1, doubts expressed by the Brighton municipality in their evidence submitted to the commission, pp. 1-2.

³⁹ *North Western Advocate*, 26 January 1939.

⁴⁰ *Mercury*, 8 February 1939.

saved without improving efficiency amalgamation would not be advantageous, because the local interest, the soul of local government, would be lost'.⁴¹

The desire to retain local control of local affairs, and to have boundaries adhere to the community interest principle, led to varying degrees of opposition to amalgamation being taken. Some councils were obstinate, declaring they had no community of interest with anyone else and wanted to be left alone. This included the municipalities of Bruny island,⁴² Richmond,⁴³ St. Leonards,⁴⁴ Glamorgan,⁴⁵ and Waratah.⁴⁶ The latter declared:

this council is of opinion that the suggested amalgamation of municipalities is striking at the very foundation of local government, because if the centre of administration is removed fifty miles from this town then local government ceases to exist, for it must be borne in mind that the theory of local government is local control by the residents of a locality of their own affairs. Therefore, the amalgamation of Waratah with any other municipality is strongly opposed.⁴⁷

The Circular Head council held a similar view, stating that it had natural boundaries that shut it away from the rest of Tasmania, making amalgamation impossible.⁴⁸

Some councils acknowledged that amalgamation could be useful elsewhere, but was difficult in their own regions because there were different interests existing between municipalities. This was claimed by the Huon council for the three municipalities existing in that region;⁴⁹ by the Lilydale council in the North East, it being 'too large and unwieldy with no community of interest between the various centres';⁵⁰ in the North

⁴¹ *North Western Advocate*, 26 January 1939.

⁴² *Mercury*, 17 January 1939.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 18 January 1939; AOT, RC 19/2/2, petition against amalgamation presented to commission in evidence submitted by Richmond municipality.

⁴⁴ *North Western Advocate*, 25 January 1939.

⁴⁵ *Mercury*, 9 February 1939.

⁴⁶ *North Western Advocate*, 18 February 1939.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 24 February 1939.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 23 February 1939.

⁴⁹ *Mercury*, 12 January 1939; AOT, RC 19/2/1, evidence submitted by Huon municipality, p1.

⁵⁰ *North Western Advocate*, 27 January 1939; AOT, RC 19/2/1, evidence submitted by Lilydale council, p2.

West by the Penguin council;⁵¹ and in the West coast by the Queenstown council.⁵² Some councils particularly ruled out who they could not be joined with because of different interests – Strahan with Queenstown,⁵³ Wynyard and Waratah,⁵⁴ Table Cape and Circular Head,⁵⁵ and Ross with Campbell Town.⁵⁶ The Leven warden L. F. Wright viewed with alarm proposals to merge his municipality with its Penguin and Kentish neighbours. Seeing it as being ‘too drastic’, Wright believed it would be ‘a grave mistake to unite municipalities with totally diverse interests’.⁵⁷ The Kentish council agreed, adding that it had no community of interest whatever with the Leven and council headquarters at Ulverstone would be out of touch with Kentish affairs.⁵⁸

Most councils adhered to the community of interest principle in governing local affairs and felt this was threatened by amalgamation. As the Burnie council put it, ‘we are of opinion that the present system of local government meets with the general requirement of the community, and is carried out generally in an efficient and economic manner. By enlarging and amalgamating municipalities the local community spirit would be lost’.⁵⁹ It led the councils to propose that any amalgamation would have to be done on the lines of community of interest⁶⁰ and could only be done with ratepayers consent.⁶¹ As we saw in chapters three and four, regionalism did little to promote greater community of interest

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 22 February 1939; see *AOT*, RC 19/2/1, evidence submitted by Penguin municipality, p1.

⁵² *ibid.*, 7 March 1939.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 8 March 1939.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 23 February 1939.

⁵⁵ see *AOT*, RC 19/2/1, evidence submitted by Circular Head municipality.

⁵⁶ *Mercury*, 15 February 1939.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 3 February 1939.

⁵⁸ *North Western Advocate*, 3 February 1939.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 22 February 1939.

⁶⁰ see evidence of the Brighton council, *Mercury*, 8 February 1939.

⁶¹ see evidence of the Westbury council, *North Western Advocate*, 1 February 1939.

between neighbours and the principle itself was used to deny change rather than promote it.

The final explanation for the resistance towards amalgamation lies in the way municipal boundaries were seen and used to protect the economic interests of settlements and municipal councils. This was explored in the first and third chapters, and the latter showed how local communities used municipal boundaries to preserve their economic interests and drew councils into defending this parochialism by highlighting how certain changes could be detrimental to municipal finances. In relation to amalgamation, fringe townships and rural settlements feared the larger municipalities that would arise from amalgamation because it would invariably result in centralization occurring within municipalities. The Latrobe council for instance spoke of its concerns that large districts and less councillors would mean the concerns of rural, fringe and low value settlements would be ignored. Because the local 'council is the centre of community life for a district', they feared rural centres would become 'retrograde, as in this modern age there is not the slightest doubt that the people will tend to move more and more to the centre of population and attraction'.⁶² In the North West, municipalities were built around townships and their rural hinterland. The smaller of these municipalities – Penguin, Kentish and Wynyard – feared that amalgamation with larger neighbours would ruin their towns. The Penguin council told the commission its amalgamation would lead to the depreciation in value of town properties, from a loss of business that occurred through it being the centre of municipal activity.⁶³

⁶² *ibid.*, 2 February 1939.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 22 February 1939.

Amalgamation was opposed because it was felt larger districts and the centralization accompanying this change would adversely affect the economic fortunes of rural and fringe settlements. This would have an impact upon the finances of the newly amalgamated councils, as annual values would depreciate and therefore either revenue would decrease or rates would have to rise.⁶⁴ Councillors were typically cautious about any changes to municipal boundaries. They were supported in this stance by the Municipal Association of Tasmania. Its president, E. W. Freeland, told the commission that the division of the state into municipalities at present should not be altered as their area and boundaries were efficient and satisfactory. This was shown by the relative state of progress by country to that of the cities of Launceston and Hobart. This was due to the intimacy between municipal councils and rural communities. For Freeland, 'the council is the soul of the community and gives it its rallying point. If larger municipalities are established, rural centres will become back numbers, and the local interest in the welfare of the immediate surrounding community will become a thing of the past, with a resultant loss to rural life which every municipality at present is doing its best to sustain'.⁶⁵ In the interests of wanting all districts around Tasmania to progress, it was necessary for local affairs to remain in the control of locals, and as such amalgamation was undesirable.⁶⁶

The Commissioner's Report

The commissioners finished compiling their evidence around May 1939, and completed their report in early August. Their first task was to assess what changes needed to be

⁶⁴ see *AOT*, RC 19/2/2, evidence submitted by Kentish council, p1.

⁶⁵ *North Western Advocate*, 25 February 1939; *AOT*, RC 19/3, evidence submitted by Municipal Association of Tasmania, p5.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p6.

made in the administrative and financial practices of municipal councils. They suggested Batt's idea of a proper system of preparing an estimate of receipts and expenditure for the forthcoming year and the adherence to these estimates was sound and should be adopted. Other minor recommendations included the levying of rates before 31 August, demanding them before 30 September, and a stricter and more rigorous procedure for their collection. Along with implementing schemes to encourage early payment, it was hoped these measures would correct the problem of outstanding rates that plagued several councils.⁶⁷ Other changes were that the office of Treasurer be abolished and its duties handed to the council clerk in order to save costs, and the control of weights and measures and weigh-bridges be handed over to the state.⁶⁸ However the commission concluded that the administration and finance of the majority of municipalities had been fairly satisfactory given the 'limiting conditions' imposed on many of them by reason of their small revenue.⁶⁹

These duties could be made easier by some changes in the way valuation and assessment of land and property was conducted. The commission thought there were too many conflicts of interest involved in having councillors and the taxation department determining the value and assessment of land and property. Therefore it recommended the establishment of a separate valuation department independent from the taxation department and the complete revaluation of lands and properties in the state.⁷⁰ The task of preparing, printing and publishing valuation and assessment rolls would be the responsibility of this new department. In order for this to be done effectively there

⁶⁷ 'Royal Commission on Local Government in Tasmania', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1939, paper no. 15 pp. 7-8.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p11.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

needed to be co-operation between municipalities and the valuation department, and councils would be obliged to report any alterations in property or land occurring within their boundaries to the department.⁷¹

The third task of the commission was to determine the best form of municipal government to meet the requirements of the state. This resolved itself into the claims of elected council government as against government by appointed commissions. The municipal councils had stated their preference for elected councils to continue, but government-appointed commissioners had put a strong case for their continuance and the commission noted their work when required had been satisfactory. Still, it continued, the 'particular form of local government is a matter of indifference to the average ratepayer. All that they are interested in is getting reasonably good value at a moderate cost'.⁷² Given that only a handful of municipalities had been forced to give up their duties to government-appointed commissions, the report therefore deemed that the existing system of elected councils had fulfilled satisfactory this criteria and so no change was necessary. However, the government would still retain the powers given to it under the *Statutory Authorities Administration Act* and ratepayers would be able to request a poll every three years as to whether an elected council or appointed commission was needed for their municipality.⁷³ The only other recommendation made was in relation to the size of the elected councils. No doubt influenced by the effectiveness of appointed commissions, the report thought 'smaller councils would tend to waste less time at meetings and be

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p17.

⁷² *ibid.*, p19.

⁷³ *ibid.*

possibly more efficient'.⁷⁴ Therefore it proposed that councils be composed of only five members.

The commission's next task was to determine the number of municipal bodies necessary or desirable for effective local administration on the island. The commissioners noted that out of 47 municipalities, 22 of them had annual revenues of below £5000. They subsequently found in examining the expenditure of these councils that a high percentage of their revenue was eaten up by overhead expenses than municipalities with larger revenues. For instance:

Table 7.1: Municipal Council Revenue and Overheads

Revenue overheads	per cent
£1000	38
£2000	24
£5000	15
£10,000	12 ½
£15,000	11
£20,000	9 ½
£30,000	8
£40,000	7 ⁷⁵

In addition to this, the commission found the average revenue of municipalities in Tasmania was £7,500, much lower in comparison to New South Wales £12,000, Victoria £19,000, and Queensland £17,500.⁷⁶ It was clear that Tasmania was disadvantaged by having municipal councils with such low revenues when compared to their counterparts on the mainland, and in overheads that were limiting council activities. The commission concluded that amalgamation to achieve a minimum revenue or at least a minimum

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p11.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

annual value was necessary.⁷⁷ The commissioners admitted several schemes of amalgamation had been submitted, none of which they were completely happy with. Aware of the existing municipal councils antagonism towards the subject, the commissioners proposed some general principles they would follow in any scheme of amalgamation:

- 1) there should be community of interest between the areas amalgamated
- 2) the areas as finally determined should not be so large as to be unwieldy
- 3) local convenience should be considered as far as possible
- 4) there should be direct monetary savings as a result
- 5) with approximately the same amount of administration cost, there should be a gain in efficiency
- 6) isolated communities should not be amalgamated with others for the mere sake of amalgamation
- 7) if an urban community is strong enough to stand on its own feet, it should not have large rural areas attached.⁷⁸

The isolated communities of Bruny Island, Flinders Island, King Island, Waratah and Zeehan were left alone, but the report readily recommended the amalgamation of other municipalities. Out of the 33 municipalities with revenues under the average of £7,500, 19 were to be affected by amalgamation in some way. Some with revenues under £7,500 survived in tact due to their large annual values. Of the bigger municipalities, some minor adjustments were advocated but no major alterations in their structure was proposed.

The report recommended amalgamating Gormanston, Queenstown and Strahan (against the wishes of each); Tasman and Sorell; Spring Bay and Glamorgan (against Glamorgan's wishes); Georgetown and Lilydale (contrary to the wishes of Lilydale);

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p20.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

Green Ponds and Bothwell (against the wishes of both); Ross and Campbell Town (strongly opposed by Ross); and Richmond and Brighton (opposed by each). Portland was to be divvied up between Fingal and Ringarooma municipalities, as was St. Leonards between Launceston, Lilydale and Evandale. On the North West, Penguin was to receive the rural parts from Burnie but lose some sections of land to Leven, and Latrobe and Kentish were to gain rural sections off Devonport, leaving Devonport and Burnie to become urban areas.⁷⁹ The changes therefore were:

Table 7.2: Proposed Changes for North West Municipal Councils 1939

	Existing Annual Value	Revenue	Proposed Annual Value	Revenue
Burnie	£65,000	£32,800	£62,000	£30,200
Penguin	£25,000	£4,400	£51,000	£8,900
Leven	£56,000	£13,700	£61,000	£14,200
Devonport	£75,000	£26,600	£61,000	£25,200
Latrobe	£33,000	£5,900	£38,000	£5,900
Kentish	£39,000	£7,300	£46,000	£8,000

The only dramatic change was enlargement of Penguin municipality. Overall, the number of municipalities was reduced from 47 to 37, and 21 were affected in some way by changing municipal boundaries.⁸⁰ The commissioners admitted ‘to many minds this will not appear drastic enough’, but they were happy they had reached the best result ‘of amalgamation in relation to the greater portion of expenditure without the disadvantages of large amalgamations, with subsequent sacrifice of local convenience’.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 20-23.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p24.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

The commission then turned to the ward system. It concurred with the general consensus that the ward system should be abolished for financial purposes, as this had resulted in lop-sided development within municipalities through discrepancies between wards in annual values, population and expenditure.⁸² But it was more wary of the municipal councils proposal to leave the ward system in place for representation of ratepayers. If this were allowed, the commission thought little would change from the system already existing, as 'a representative elected by a ward would consider it his duty to obtain as much of the money available as possible for his ward. Even if he did not think on these lines, his electors probably would, and the result would probably be that at the next election he would lose his seat'.⁸³ If members were elected by the electors of the whole municipality, the commission thought they would be free from 'sectional influence' and therefore endeavour to expend the available money in the best interests of the municipality as a whole. Connected with this was the issue of plural voting, in which the municipalities wanted no significant changes. The commission, however, advocated that a system of single voting by all persons interested in the property concerned, that is owners and occupiers on the assessment roll, be adopted. It gave no substantial reasons why it chose to do so.⁸⁴

The last major issue the commission reported upon was road maintenance. It acknowledged that municipalities 'were doing the work well', but were hampered by a lack of funds.⁸⁵ It therefore considered that no radical changes were necessary, just enough to enable municipalities to obtain enough revenue to discharge their duties. For

⁸² *ibid.*, p26.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p27.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p29.

this end they supported the idea of grouping municipalities into large road districts, so that they could obtain engineer and plant equipment to carry out their work. The new road districts were to have if possible a minimum road revenue of £10,000, and each municipality would delegate one member to serve on a district board which would function for the group. The boards would be 'allocating and expending authorities', so municipalities would still collect road rates in their jurisdiction, and the term of office for each board would be three years. In the North West, Devonport would be left alone, but a road district comprising Penguin, Leven, Kentish and Latrobe would be created.⁸⁶ The commission saw no monetary savings in the scheme, but hoped expenditure of road funds would be 'carried out more efficiently and to the general welfare of the road system in the state'.⁸⁷ To help this process, it recommended raising the minimum road rate from 1s 4d in the pound to 1s 6d in the pound.

Finally, the commission recommended the creation of a local government board to form a link between municipal and state government. It would be involved in the regulation of qualification examinations for municipal officers; the minor adjustment of municipal boundaries; the review of loan proposals by local authorities and advising the government on their feasibility, and other matters that the government deemed important.⁸⁸ The result was a report that was reasonably safe. The Royal Commission acknowledged the councils concerns about amalgamation, and agreed that if it occurred it should be along the lines of the community of interest principle. Its proposals therefore were the barest it thought the state government could get away with. The commission reduced the number

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p31.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p30.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p32.

of municipal councils only by 10 to 37, in contrast for instance to Batt who suggested 18 was an apt figure for the size of Tasmania. Most of the administrative and financial changes the Commission recommended were viewed sympathetically by the councils, and the establishment of a local government board and road districts were moderate proposals compared to either rigidly stating the power of either state or municipal governments or creating large municipalities for greater efficiency in road maintenance. Despite the Commission going against the wishes of a few councils in regard to amalgamation, their report was hardly a revolutionary transformation of the municipal system of Tasmania and as such did not promise to be viewed all that indignantly by the councils.

The Local Government Act 1940

Cabinet briefly browsed the report in late August,⁸⁹ and it was published in the press in early September 1939. The *Advocate* noted the recommendations were not 'drastic' and the subject of amalgamation had been 'dealt with lightly'.⁹⁰ The initial thoughts of wardens along the coast towards the report was favourable, Walter Cutts of Latrobe remarking that the councils had 'very little to fear' from it.⁹¹ Devonport, Kentish and Penguin councils were happy with the proposed changes to their boundaries, and all municipalities were pleased that the ward system had been abolished for financial

⁸⁹ AOT, Premier's Department: General Correspondence files, Royal Commission on Local Government file, E. Dwyer Gray to G. J. McElwee 30 August 1939, (Ref: PD 1 1939 file no. 73)

⁹⁰ *North Western Advocate*, 5 September 1939.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 6 September 1939.

purposes.⁹² But a few weeks and a more thorough reading of the report changed this attitude. Deloraine was one of the first councils to be scathing of the report, and by mid-September doubts over some recommendations had been expressed at Devonport and Leven.⁹³ With the outbreak of hostilities in Europe and Australia herself at war, the Devonport council urged the government to defer action on the report until the war ended.⁹⁴

This was not the government's intention. The Municipal Association in early September had asked the government whether it intended to introduce legislation during the next session of parliament giving effect to the recommendations in the report.⁹⁵ Cabinet, however, did not discuss the report seriously during September and dealt with the matter in early October.⁹⁶ In a memo to the Premier Dwyer-Gray, the Minister of Lands and Works T. H. Davies noted the question of municipal reform, particularly amalgamation, was contentious and needed 'very mature thought and consideration' by cabinet and parliament.⁹⁷ In light of the penalty incurred by the state from the Grants Commission, Davies suggested the matter could not be laid aside for the duration of the war, and advocated the government 'proceed slowly' in enacting changes. The government should introduce the report to parliament in the next session, and then appointed a select committee of both houses to consider the recommendations of the Royal Commission and report back to parliament. 'Any government bill brought in without the consideration I propose' Davies concluded, 'I think might be easily defeated

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ *ibid.*, 12 September 1939 & 19 September 1939.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 25 September 1939.

⁹⁵ AOT, PD 1 1939 file no. 73, Municipal Association of Tasmania to Dwyer-Gray 6 September 1939.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, Dwyer-Gray to Municipal Association of Tasmania 25 September 1939.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 'Report on the Royal Commission on Local Government' T. H Davies, to Premier, 2 October 1939.

and cause prejudice against the present government with regard to local government and their administration'.⁹⁸

Opposition to the report from municipal councils remained strong throughout October. The St. Leonards council opined that 'the more one looked into the report, the more difficult it was to understand how such findings could be arrived at on the weight of the evidence submitted'.⁹⁹ The Port Cygnet council admitted it could not agree with the report 'in its entirety' and wanted major changes,¹⁰⁰ a sentiment reached as well by the Latrobe and Kentish councils.¹⁰¹ At their meetings in October, the Devonport and Leven councils passed resolutions that the report and local government reform be shelved until after the war given its complex and contentious nature.¹⁰² On the eve of a new parliamentary session, the *Advocate* noted that the view of local bodies towards reform as indicated in the report was 'adverse'.¹⁰³

The Labor government was unfazed by this, however, announcing that municipal reform would be a central concern in a legislative programme reduced to a 'minimum consistent with essential requirements' due to the war.¹⁰⁴ In parliament the Premier reiterated that municipal reform was necessary after the penalties inflicted by the Grants Commission on account of low rating in Tasmania, and 'the taxpayers of the non-claimant states could not be expected justly to supply the Tasmanian treasury with large

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *North Western Advocate*, 7 October 1939.

¹⁰⁰ AOT, PD 1 1939 file no. 73, Port Cygnet Municipality to Chief Secretary 9 October 1939.

¹⁰¹ *North Western Advocate*, 16 October 1939, 18 October 1939.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 10 October 1939, 17 October 1939.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 24 October 1939.

¹⁰⁴ *Mercury*, 25 October 1939.

sums to relieve Tasmanian ratepayers of obligations which were discharged by ratepayers in other states'.¹⁰⁵

As his Treasurer Robert Cosgrove told parliament, this meant the amalgamation of some of the present municipalities, in which there was a strong case in favour of the proposal, but which had been undermined by the parochialism of the councils.¹⁰⁶ But the government's intention to have the report reviewed by a select committee was savaged by the opposition. If reform was so urgent, and a thorough, expensive and lengthy report of recommendations had been produced, what was the need for a select committee? The government was accused of seeking to throw responsibility of local government reform onto the upper chamber. 'Spineless' was one members opinion of the government action.¹⁰⁷ While the motion for a joint committee was passed by the House of Assembly along party lines, it was resoundingly rejected by the Legislative Council who saw no justification for such a committee and charged the government with attempting to evade its responsibilities. In the words of P. C. Best, M.L.C for Meander, 'it was evident that when the government found the report met with a hostile reception it wondered how it would evade the issue, and asked for the select committee so that some responsibility could be taken by members of the Council. The government should either throw out the report, or have the courage to introduce a bill'.¹⁰⁸

Dwyer-Gray was furious, blasting the Council for failing its duties, as a joint committee would indicate to the government just how much the upper chamber would give on any

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 27 October 1939.

¹⁰⁶ *North Western Advocate*, 2 November 1939.

¹⁰⁷ *Mercury*, 26 October 1939, Neil Campbell, member for Wilmot.

¹⁰⁸ *North Western Advocate*, 17 November 1939.

local government bill.¹⁰⁹ Still, he asked for legislation embodying the recommendations of the report to be drawn up.¹¹⁰ As parliament discussed a joint committee to review the report, a special conference of municipalities was convened formally to state their views on the subject. The conference agreed to nearly all of the recommendations in regard to administration and finance and the basis of valuation. It reaffirmed its commitment to elected councils, plural voting, and ward system retained for representation. It stated that local government 'is essentially the case of the smaller unit' and as such 'drastic alterations' in the municipal system were strongly opposed.¹¹¹ It therefore concluded that during a 'national emergency the conference considers that no legislation should be enacted that would in any way disorganize existing efforts made by local authorities in the formation of patriotic, civic defence committee etc, particularly when no monetary saving [from amalgamation] would be effected'.¹¹²

The government ignored their plea for legislation to be suspended, but the strident opposition by the councils led to numerous and significant concessions being made in the draft bill which was prepared by April 1940. The amalgamation of various municipalities recommended by the report would not be embodied in the bill, but referred to the local government board that was to be established which would review each proposed merger. As well, it was decided not to proceed with the establishment of road districts or a land valuation department.¹¹³ The government sent a copy of the draft legislation, labeled

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 28 November 1939.

¹¹⁰ see *AOT*, P 1 1939 file no. 73, Dwyer-Gray to Attorney-General 30 October 1939; and Dwyer-Gray to Attorney-General 5 December 1939.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 'Special Conference held by Municipal Association of Tasmania in Hobart', 15 November 1939.

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ *Mercury*, 10 April 1940.

‘confidential’, to all the municipal councils.¹¹⁴ Naturally it soon found its way into the press, the councils not being shy in airing their opinions on it. The Westbury council declared the bill if passed would mean the ‘end of local government’.¹¹⁵ W. A. Bethune, a member of the Hamilton council, thought the bill departed ‘from all principles of democracy’.¹¹⁶ Opposition to most of the measures in the legislation was expressed by the Evandale, Westbury, Huon, Brighton, Table Cape, Hamilton, Oatlands, Fingal and Clarence councils.¹¹⁷ The *Mercury* felt the bill went far beyond the Royal Commission’s recommendations.¹¹⁸ Cosgrove, now Premier, was unperturbed, suggesting the criticism was ‘intemperate in many cases, prejudiced in others’.¹¹⁹

In parliament the bill was viewed less harshly, there being three main sticking points. The first was the system of voting in municipal elections. The Labor Party naturally favoured abolishing plural voting, seeing it as a class privilege which could not be defended. Instead, it wanted the franchise applicable to House of Assembly elections to be used in the municipal sphere. The opposition was wary of such a proposal, and was sympathetic to the municipalities view that those who paid rates should have the most say in how they were spent. The second was the provision for ratepayers to take a poll to decide whether they wanted an elected council or appointed commission to manage their local affairs. The opposition charged the government with wanting to usurp local democracy, but the government believed it would make councils more accountable to ratepayers than under existing arrangements. The third point was the establishment of a

¹¹⁴ AOT, Premier’s Department: General Correspondence files, Bill to Amend the Local Government Act file, draft copy of Local Government bill 1940, (Ref: PD 1 1940 file no. 107).

¹¹⁵ *Mercury*, 7 May 1940.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, 8 May 1940.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, 7 May 1940 & 8 May 1940.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 9 May 1940.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

local government board, the opposition alleging it would be used by the government to control councils and was unnecessary with a Municipal Association already existing. The government replied the board would have recommendatory powers only, and would be useful in promoting greater co-operation between the councils and government.¹²⁰

While the bill passed through the House of Assembly, these arguments were not enough to satisfy the Legislative Council. It rejected altogether the proposal for adult franchise in municipal elections, holding firm to the principles embodied in plural voting. The proposal for ratepayers to vote to install appointed commissions was viewed unsympathetically, and an amendment in which names of prospective commissioners would have to be published before any poll scraped through by a vote. The Council was extremely wary of a local government board, seeing it as a means for the state government to extend its influence over the councils, and worried how the board would deal with the sensitive subject of amalgamation.¹²¹ A deadlock between the chambers resulted, the government insisting on no alterations to its proposals of adult franchise and local government board would be tolerated. With the Council not budging either, the government announced it would drop the bill. Cosgrove blasted the council for its obstinacy: 'they are worse than Hitler' seethed his Attorney-General E. J. Ogilvie.¹²² The *Mercury* blamed the government. If reform was so necessary the government should have passed an amended bill, 'instead of dropping it in a pique, and then seeking to make the Council the scapegoat'.¹²³

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 22 May 1940 & 23 May 1940.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 6 June 1940 & 7 June 1940.

¹²² *ibid.*, 20 June 1940, 24 June 1940.

¹²³ *ibid.*, 25 June 1940.

The government reviewed the bill while parliament took a break in the middle of the year, and announced it would re-submit when the new parliamentary session began.¹²⁴ They had met with the Municipal Association and agreed on certain compromises, but the bill was much the same as the one previously rejected by the Legislative Council. The adult franchise, the holding of polls on the question of government by council or commission, and the establishment of a local government board remained, with slight changes to appease the municipalities. In deference to the councils the ward system was retained for representation and greater flexibility allowed in establishing a minimum road rate.¹²⁵ The bill was put to the House of Assembly and passed, but again was rejected by the Legislative Council who disagreed with the provisions for the adult franchise and local government board.¹²⁶ A conference of both houses was convened to work out a compromise but ended again in stalemate.¹²⁷ The government this time instead of dropping the bill, caved into the amendments suggested by the Legislative Council. The proposal to set up a local government board was dropped, and plural voting retained albeit with the maximum votes an elector could wield reduced from six votes to four.¹²⁸

The bill was subsequently passed, becoming the *Local Government Act* 1940, a rather hollow shell of the recommendations contained in the Royal Commission report. With no local government board, amalgamation, or road districts, the Act outlined administrative changes which was hoped would improve the financial accountability of the councils.¹²⁹ At least it enabled Treasurer Dwyer-Gray to state in his report to the

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, 22 August 1940.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, 11 October 1940.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 13 November 1940.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, 14 November 1940.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 15 November 1940.

¹²⁹ see *Local Government Act* 1940.

Grants Commission in 1940 that some attempt had been made to reform municipal administration on the island.¹³⁰ The *Mercury* welcomed the measure, stating the old Act had become unworkable and contained 'anachronisms that were not in keeping with modern methods of local government'.¹³¹ While admitting it was not as comprehensive as A. G. Ogilvie had planned, it concluded the Act 'should go a long way towards making the administration of the municipalities an easier task for all concerned'.¹³²

So what conclusions can be drawn about the process of municipal reform from the Royal Commission of 1939 to the *Local Government Act* 1940? The first is that there are parallels to the situation surrounding the passing of the 1906 Act. A government wishing to make substantial reforms was confronted by strident municipal opposition and an obstinate Legislative Council. In order to make reforms seem as being reasonably urgent, the government was forced to compromise and adhere to the wishes of the municipalities and Legislative Council. The strongest wish of the municipal councils was that no amalgamation of municipalities should take place. They resisted this move from a skepticism of the benefits amalgamation would bring, and an attachment to the community of interest principle which coupled with municipal boundaries being used to protect economic interests saw local bodies wary about change.

Faced with such an disinclination towards reform, the Royal Commission whose job it was to outline a major overhaul of the municipal system was always going to be limited in achieving the outcomes desired by the government. Eventually, it produced a rather safe report, advocating the barest of changes it thought could be reasonably enacted. As

¹³⁰ see 'Statement presented to the Commonwealth Grants Commission', *JPPP(Tas)*, 1940-41, paper no. 5 p9.

¹³¹ *Mercury*, 15 November 1940.

¹³² *ibid*

it turned out these recommendations were resisted, the result being an Act bringing reform far below the expectations of A. G. Ogilvie who ordered the Royal Commission, or perhaps needed adequately to solve the problems the municipal councils faced.

UTAS

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to discover why only moderate municipal reform was made between 1906 and 1939, and why municipal councils had such an aversion to their amalgamation. In particular, it sought to make a connection between the small insular towns, regional loyalties, and municipal structures of Tasmania, and how these influenced local government reform.

To summarize this argument, the settlement of the North West Coast from the 1850s produced an early apathy towards local institutions and later townships embedded within a strong sense of localism – a distinctive awareness of place and the differences between it and its neighbours. This localism came to influence the creation of the various *ad-hoc* local authorities that arose on the North West, particularly the desire for small units that corresponded with a sharply defined local ‘interest’. As economic development was localized on the North West, the allocation of municipal boundaries was important because vulnerable settlements potentially could be disadvantaged if they found themselves under a local body indifferent or hostile to their interests. Therefore, those in the North West stressed that municipal boundaries should be drawn up with due regard to ensuring a community of interest between a council and its local area.

After a comprehensive scheme of local government was introduced to Tasmania in 1906, the attachment of municipal councils to the community of interest principle was encouraged and reinforced in the following three decades. This was due, in part, to the way municipal business was conducted, with councils often parochial in ensuring the needs of those within their jurisdiction were adequately met. It was also due to the limited results of regionalism in the inter-war years in fostering greater co-operation between neighbouring municipalities. The net result was a municipal system that put a

strong emphasis on preserving local interests, obviously an admirable quality for local government, but one which put obstacles in the path of any major municipal reform.

The state government, for its part, wanted municipal districts large enough so that they would be financially able to discharge duties that had been previously borne by the public treasury. In 1906 the government was seeking to relinquish some of its financial responsibility for the construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, and jetties upon local residents, and eager to bring greater efficiency to a local government system that had spawned hundreds of *ad-hoc* local authorities. In the 1920s and 1930s it sought larger bodies in response to increasing financial problems of some councils caused by low revenue and by the difficulties municipal councils were having in discharging their fundamental responsibility of maintaining local roads. The government then, wanted a municipal system based upon the lines of economy and efficiency, and saw larger local bodies as the most convenient means of achieving this.

Local government reform therefore during this period is a clash between two competing claims – the desire for economy and efficiency on the one hand, and an attachment to the principle of community of interest on the other. Local bodies feared that municipal boundaries drawn up along the lines of economy and efficiency would ignore the similar and different interests within local areas, thereby creating political problems in any new bodies formed. They were apprehensive that larger local bodies would have a detrimental effect on rural fringe and small townships around the state. It was also felt that municipal boundaries based on economic grounds would mean the end of ‘local’ government, and result instead in administration from the larger and wealthier towns on the island. Significantly, too, municipal councils in the 1920s and 1930s were extremely skeptical that any savings or better outcomes would arise from amalgamation.

The strong opposition from municipal councils towards amalgamation, along with an obstinate Legislative Council sympathetic to the municipal council viewpoint, and the necessity, on the state government's behalf, to enact some sort of reform, saw a compromise between the competing claims. Most often, however, it was the principle that there should be a community of interest between a council and its local area that held sway. In the process of creating the *Local Government Act* 1906 the government did succeed in reducing the number of *ad-hoc* bodies to 51 municipalities, but in drawing up municipal boundaries and implementing the ward system gave due deference to the community of interest principle. In the aftermath of the 1939 Royal Commission the community of interest claim was in the ascendancy, enabling the government to enact only small administrative changes.

Along with highlighting the dynamic process of municipal reform, this study notes four other important features of local government reform during this period. The first is how reform was driven by financial pressures on the state government, which subsequently pushed for greater economy and efficiency in municipal affairs. One impetus towards reform was times of great economic difficulty for the island, and the pressure this put on the government to cut public expenditure and find new sources of revenue. In this case, relinquishing the burden of public works and some local services to local bodies was an attractive proposal, provided, of course, that they were capable of handling the responsibility. This is what prompted the introduction of municipal government into Hobart and Launceston from the 1840s and the Lyons government attempts at reform in the difficult economic period of the 1920s.

Another impetus for reform came from broader national developments, which had serious financial consequences for the state government. The first of these was Federation, and anxiety over its repercussions for state finances saw the introduction of

the Piesse bill of 1898, another bill in 1902, and the process that eventually resulted in the *Local Government Act* 1906. The second development was the Financial Agreement of 1927 and the creation of the Commonwealth Grants Commission. This saw a change in emphasis with the Commonwealth trying to make state governments more responsible for their financial situation if they wished to receive Commonwealth money. The Tasmanian government was still dependent on Commonwealth grants during the 1930s, and was upset when its grant was reduced in the late 1930s for a number of reasons, including the poor performance of its municipal system.

Along with financial pressures on the state government, the financial difficulties experienced by municipal councils after the Great War was another impetus for reform. From the 1920s the councils suffered from numerous problems involving increasing overheads, low revenue and outstanding rates. This affected their ability to discharge their duties properly, especially road maintenance, and resulted in them relying on the state government to construct and maintain a fair proportion of local works. When several councils collapsed in the 1930s and needed to be replaced with government-appointed commissions, it suggested something was seriously amiss with the municipal system of the state.

The second important feature to be noted, is that when these financial pressures resulted in proposed changes, any attempt at reform by the state government had to be done in consultation with and support of local bodies, otherwise little was achieved. This was due to an attachment to the prevailing system by local bodies and an apprehension about change, a skepticism of the benefits of reform, and a Legislative Council that would block proposed legislation if it felt bills lacked popular support among the councils. In other words, any attempt by the state government to impose or force change in the municipal system was strongly resisted. State-imposed reform failed with Inglis-Clark's

bill of 1888, the Piesse bill of 1898, the 1902 bill, and the Lyons government commission of 1926. The *Statutory Authorities Administration Act* was successful only after prolonged agitation by municipal councils resulted in it being significantly watered-down and even then it scraped through the Legislative Council by one vote.

The resistance towards state-imposed reform springs from the third important feature of municipal reform in this period. This is the municipal council's attachment to the principle of 'community of interest'. This principle fitted in well with the localized view of development on the North West, and was often invoked to protect or enhance the local interests of either the council or its community. Most significantly, it was often used against reform rather than as a mechanism for change. This was clearly seen in the process establishing the *Local Government Act* 1906, the debate over municipal boundaries in the Devonport area between 1907 and 1909, and the continued opposition to amalgamation up until 1939 on the grounds that it threatened to extinguish councils and areas with similar interests.

That the community of interest principle was used to defend small established districts was the result of the fourth important feature of municipal reform – regionalism. That is, the failure to cultivate greater regional unity and common objectives within contiguous municipalities. Though the various regional organisations that were formed after 1908 did do useful work, they were hamstrung by the parochialism among municipal councils that often worked to undermine regional initiatives. Far from encouraging amalgamation of municipalities by creating broader community of interests within a region, the limited results achieved by regionalism seemed only to entrench the relationship between localism and municipal structures in the state.

Local government reform in Tasmania between 1906 and 1939 was characterized then by several features: compromise between claims of economy and efficiency and

community of interest; financial pressures put on the state government to enact changes; resistance to state-imposed reform; a strong attachment to the community of interest principle that created such resistance; and the failure of regionalism to facilitate greater amalgamations of municipalities. This Tasmanian experience corresponds with the general description of municipal government in Australia between 1901 and 1945 as being 'ossified'.¹

In all states where large scale amalgamations of municipal councils were attempted, only South Australia in the midst of the Great Depression was successful in reducing the numbers of municipal bodies. In comparison with the mainland states, some features peculiar to Tasmania could be noted. The most significant is the role of the Legislative Council in Tasmania in often being a bulwark to reform. State Labor parties during this period were often the most anxious to bring changes upon the municipal system, and in New South Wales and Queensland during the 1920s and 1930s were advantaged by the existence of relatively weak upper chambers in those states. The Tasmanian Labor parties under Lyons, Ogilvie and Cosgrove, in contrast, were forced to deal with an upper chamber that was skeptical of change and sympathetic to the views of existing local bodies. Councils in other state were also more amicable towards arrangements to foster greater co-operation between municipalities, such as Joint Authorities or regional arrangements, that could at least placate any attempts from state governments to amalgamate them for greater efficiency. The limited results achieved by regionalism in Tasmania during the inter-war years in contrast, did little to either encourage amalgamation nor persuade the state government that the existing municipalities could be left as they were. Finally, local authorities in Tasmania resisted amalgamation despite

¹ J. Power, R. Wettenhall, and J. Halligan (ed.), *Local Government Systems of Australia*, (Canberra 1981) pp. 14-15.

taking on substantially less financial responsibilities than their mainland counterparts:

Table C.I: Total Receipts and Expenditure for Local Authorities in Each State 1930-1936 (£)

Total Receipts for Local Authorities in Each State 1930-1936

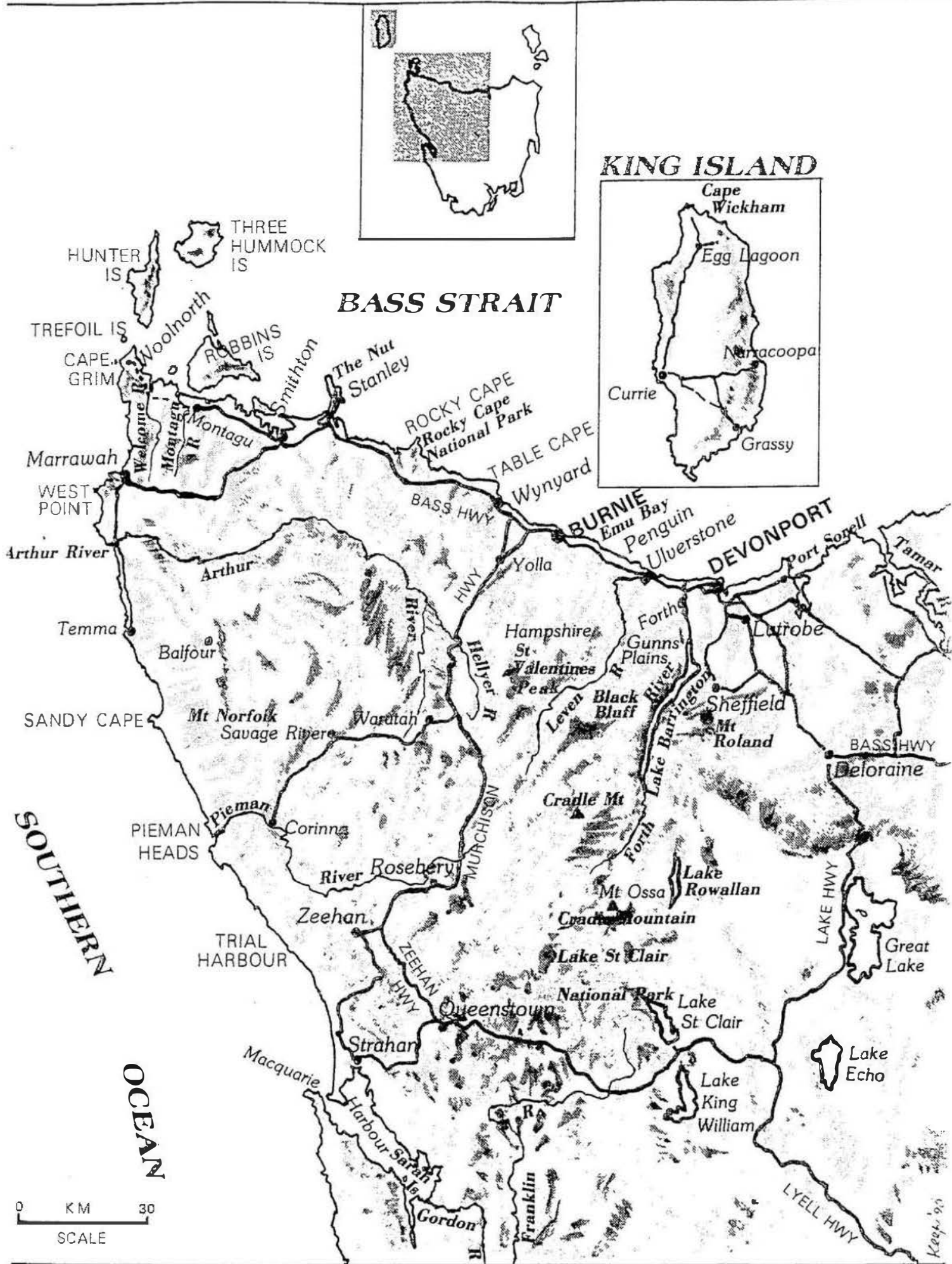
Year	N.S.W.	Vic.	Qld.	S.A.	W.A.	Tas.
1930	15,178,581	8,264,323	7,708,367	1,917,895	2,502,246	1,040,725
1932	12,271,263	6,393,451	6,796,763	1,313,745	1,811,281	975,276
1934	15,850,004	6,988,917	8,617,731	1,346,952	1,947,944	973,806
1936	14,504,702	7,516,859	9,325,309	1,458,777	2,255,868	1,130,205

Total Expenditure for Local Authorities in Each State 1930-1936

Year	N.S.W.	Vic.	Qld.	S.A.	W.A.	Tas.
1930	15,900,864	8,738,537	7,632,981	2,021,261	2,527,902	1,026,114
1932	11,496,519	6,093,141	6,645,013	1,269,121	1,772,998	934,139
1934	15,840,696	6,669,870	8,363,739	1,349,120	1,953,197	961,513
1936	15,066,242	7,659,211	9,434,448	1,439,442	2,181,460	1,074,521 ²

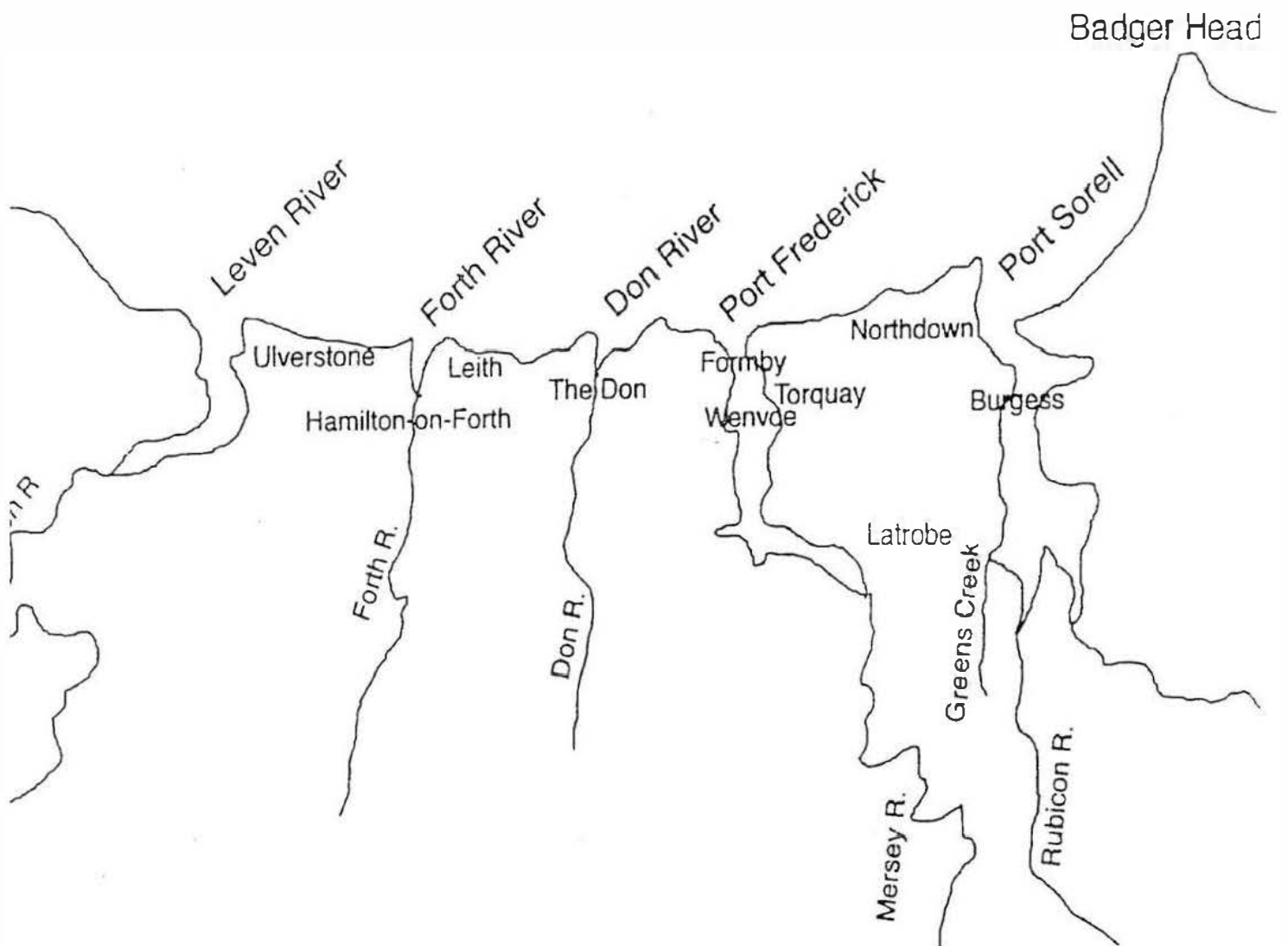
The unwillingness of municipal councils of Tasmania to entertain the idea of amalgamation despite their own financial troubles, perilous state finances, and a comparative lack of financial responsibility suggests the strength and influence the principle of community of interest wielded in the Tasmanian municipal system at this time, thereby protecting it against any attempts at rationalization and reform. As this thesis has endeavored to demonstrate, the strong attachment to the community of interest principle has its roots deep in the particular history and settlement of the island of Tasmania.

² *Commonwealth Year Book*, 1932 p93; 1934 p94; 1936 p97; 1938 p458;

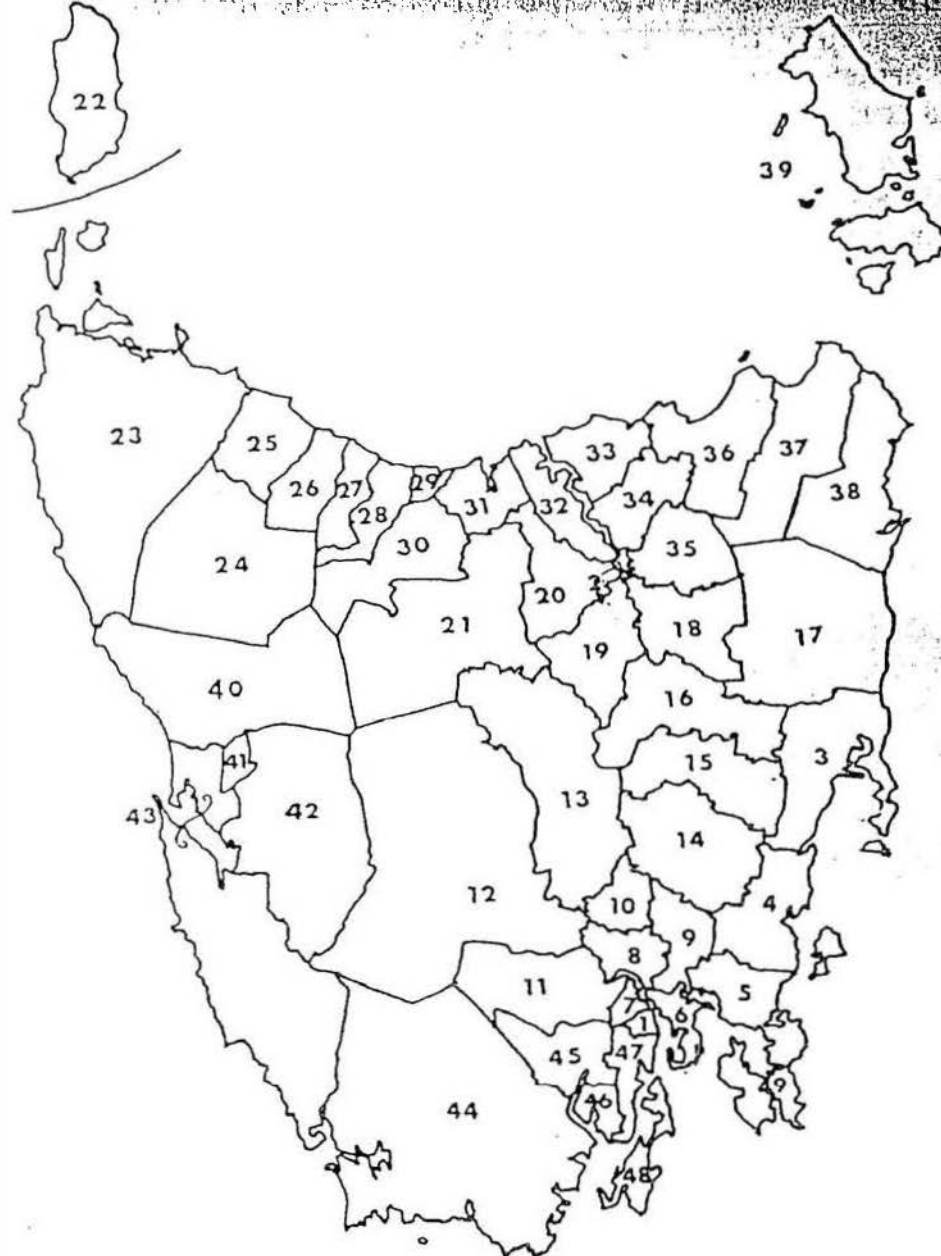


COUNTY OF DEVON

Settlements on five rivers.



Source: M. Bennett, *The Quiet Achievers: the history of the Port of Devonport* (Launceston: Regal Press 1995)



MAP 9. MUNICIPALITIES.

KEY

Municipalised 1852^a

1. Hobart
2. Launceston

Municipalised 1860-66^a

3. Glamorgan
4. Spring Bay
5. Sorell
6. Clarence
7. Glenorchy
8. Brighton

Municipalised 1852^a

9. Richmond
10. Green Ponds
11. New Norfolk
12. Hamilton
13. Bothwell
14. Oatlands
15. Ross
16. Campbell Town
17. Fingal
18. Evandale
19. Longford
20. Westbury
21. Deloraine

Municipalised 1907^b

22. King Island
23. Circular Head
24. Waratah
25. Wynyard
26. Burnie
27. Penguin
28. Ulverstone
29. Devonport
30. Kentish
31. Latrobe
32. Beaconsfield
33. George Town
34. Lilydale

Municipalised 1907^b

35. St Leonards
36. Scottsdale
37. Ringarooma
38. Portland
39. Flinders
40. Zeehan
41. Queenstown
42. Gormanston
43. Strahan
44. Esperance^c
45. Huon
46. Port Cygnet
47. Kingborough
48. Bruny
49. Tasman

^a Present areas are shown. The original areas were not always coterminous with these.

^b The other 1907 municipalities, which merged into the two cities by 1919, were Invermay, New Town and Queenborough.

^c Includes Macquarie Island.

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